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Title: What God Does Hallowed Secularism Believe In?

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8/26/2007--The Ancient Hebrews discovered a power at the center of things. They did not always understand this power. It was a mystery to them. But they did see it work in history. And they were able to sense its presence. Unlike any other people, they saw this power as involved in the life of humankind and as on the side of the powerless. In fact, they had a sense that this current world did not reflect the way things were supposed to be. They were certain that the power at the center of things, in contrast, did reflect the way things were supposed to be. If you read the Bible, you see the original Garden of Eden, its loss and the differing ways of trying to put reality back the way it is supposed to be. One such way is the covenant with Abraham.

The Hebrews did not think they could command this power. They could not even name it. Sometimes it appeared as person-like, but at other times as power itself. It was the Hebrew genius to try to figure this out.

I think the ancient Hebrews were absolutely right that there is a mysterious power in reality and that its effects are present in our own lives and in history. I also think they were right about its strangeness. I don't have any doubt that it is real and that it is in control rather than we. Yet, it is behind the natural order, not instead of it. It is not doing tricks with nature. The Hebrews apparently also thought that miracles in nature were uncertain, since magicians are shown in the Bible as able to do some of the same things in nature that God does.

The Hebrews thought this power was a something like a person. Here I think they made a mistake. This mistake led them to imagine a plan—God's plan.

By the time of Jesus, some of the Jews foresaw a Messiah and an end to the world as we know it, with the resurrection of the dead and the last great day. The Jewish followers of Jesus knew him as this Messiah and his resurrection was the beginning—the first fruit—of the coming end, the eschaton. Some current Christian thinkers maintain that the second coming was not to be the end of history. Yet it was to be the end of death, and the resurrection of the dead, so in what sense could it not be the end of history?

In any event, Jesus is now for Christians the face of God, who is absolutely a person with a will and a plan and the power to control nature and change its laws.

Atheism and Hallowed Secularism both deny that this sort of God is real. But I guess for atheists, this world seems pretty self-explanatory. We happen to be here and we do things and then we die. There is nothing in any sense behind all this.

But I think the Hebrews were right and not the atheists. In some ways, the world we know is out of whack. It is not the way things are supposed to be. Somehow, humans know this, especially once a book, like the Bible, points it out. When humans work to change this world, both collectively and personally, toward the way it is supposed to be, they come into contact with something that helps them, that comforts them, that consoles them and sometimes "speaks" to them. They begin to see the world as it is supposed to be. But this force does not change nature. It doesn't work that way. And it isn't always present. The Hebrews were slaves in Egypt 400 years before Moses. Those cries were never answered.

When humans try to bring a new world into being on their own, the results are failure, and sometimes catastrophic violence. This is utopianism. But, when, instead, humans work with this power, or better yet, allow this power to work through them, the results can be spectacular.

I have previously called this something a tilt in the universe, toward the good and the weak. But that formulation does not seem right. A tilt does not comfort. A tilt does not communicate. But, on the other hand, a personal God is just a big and wonderful human being, which is not right either. So I will just leave it as a powerful force at the heart of reality sometimes experienced as personal.

You can now see that the disagreement between atheism and religion is not about the existence of God. It is instead about the nature of reality. The word God can sometimes be a shorthand way of claiming a kind of meaningfulness and order in the universe. To that extent, lawyers and judges are arrogant to think of restricting claims about God. For these are not just "religious" claims but assertions about how things are. Every people must decide what is ultimately true about the way things are. Atheists imagine that politics can be separated from that decision. They do not understand that the decision about the nature of reality is behind every political act.