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October 10, 2007: The Importance of Religion to Hallowed Secularism

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10/10/2007--Here is another illustration of why secularism needs religion, that is, needs to be a Hallowed Secularism. In America today, there is a renaissance of the thought of the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. A lot of people have rediscovered him. Niebuhr is looked to because of his "Christian realism." He knew that there really are no just nations. Every country is, to some extent, out to better itself at the express of its neighbors. A number of opponents of the war in Iraq are now citing Niebuhr. However, although Niebuhr's point of view is very important, it cannot be grasped by itself, on its own terms alone. As Paul Elie recently said in an online Atlantic Monthly interview, losing touch with the Biblical perspective and looking at things only from a secular point of view, has led to shallowness in our political life. We have forgotten about human frailty, natural catastrophe, the perpetual threat of irrational violence and the propensity toward oppression. We have lost the sense of history and of the eternal lessons of human experience. I'm sure that we could have relearned these lessons from other religious traditions as well, but we have to draw from some deep well in order to live fully and deeply. We learn these things from religion. We see all the time what religion can do. We see a Martin Luther King. We see a Gandhi. We see a Dalai Lama. We see a Desmond Tutu. We see Buddhist monks facing down guns and bayonets. We see an Amish community forgiving a killer of young school girls. We know, and we ought to be willing to admit, that religion is a potential source of greatness in the human spirit. And we also know, if we are candid, that such sources are not all that common.