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Title: Hallowed Secularism's Contribution to Materialism

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11/3/2007--On July 16, 1945, when the first atomic bomb detonated in the New Mexico desert, Robert Oppenheimer, Supervising Scientist of the Manhattan Project, quoted the Hindu classic text, the Bhagavad-Gita: "...now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds... ." Why would a scientist quote a religious text? There might have been no other way to say what he felt he needed to say. Justice Sandra Day O'Connor once wrote in a different context that religious language can serve purposes no other kind of language can serve. Such language, she wrote, expresses, "in the only ways reasonably possible in our culture, the legitimate secular purposes of solemnizing public occasions, expressing confidence in the future, and encouraging the recognition of what is worthy of appreciation in society." Justice O'Connor's description lies a little flat, given what Oppenheimer had just seen. But the idea for both of them might be that religion can express depth in human life that secular concepts simply cannot. When confronted with the precise sort of potential apocalypse that religion has described, it is not surprising that prayer rises to our lips. Materialism is not an orientation that expresses meaning or significance well. The scientists involved in the Manhattan Project were busy solving problems. Making the bomb was not an experience of transcendence. But seeing the bomb explode was such an experience. We have in this example from Oppenheimer an indicator of what transcendence is. Transcendence is a sense that more than the ordinary is present in a given situation. The difference between the religious orientation and the materialist one may be said to lie in whether that sense is reflecting something real--that is, that something beyond the ordinary is actually present--or whether the sense of something beyond is just a feeling we make up. No one denies, however, that we do feel it. Oppenheimer felt it. In theory, the scientist who feels what Oppenheimer felt does not need something called Hallowed Secularism. Such a scientist could simply refer to his or her own religion for the felt necessity of depth. But that was not what Oppenheimer did. Oppenheimer was not speaking as a believing Hindu. He was not engaging in a full theological expression from within any particular religion. Instead, he was seeking a connection to religion, or religious insight, without the baggage of doctrinal commitment. That is what Hallowed Secularism offers--a connection between our religious traditions—Our Religions—and the life of materialism. It is a way for the non-believer—Oppenheimer attended Ethical Culture School before college—to connect with transcendent traditions. This is an important contribution that only Hallowed Secularism can make.