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Hallowed Secularism

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### October 5, 2007: Hallowed Secularism's Contribution to Secularism

Bruce Ledewitz

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Title: Hallowed Secularism's Contribution to Secularism

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11/5/2207--Beyond the need for expressing the transcendent, there is a second aspect of the need to connect the materialistic scientist with religion. The mature scientist should realize that he himself is in question in his investigations. Here is something else Oppenheimer said at the time of the bomb test that refers to the religious overtones of his experience: "In some crude sense which no vulgarity, no humor, no overstatement can quite extinguish, the physicists have known sin, and this is a knowledge which they cannot lose." It is possible that Oppenheimer here was referring only to the sin of others, to the sin of man, for example. But, given his involvement a year later in the 1946 Acheson-Lilienthal plan for international atomic control, it seems to me that the sin to which he referred was also personal. I don't mean by calling it sin that something was done that should not have been done. Rather, I am referring to the ambiguity of any action in a fallen world. In the circumstances of World War II, producing the atomic bomb was particularly in that category of ethical ambiguity. The bomb was and is a horror. Yet, its development potentially protected the world from a Nazi bomb, and its use saved thousands of lives, including Japanese lives. The scientist cannot help but be guilty. Materialism likes to pretend that the human being who investigates the natural world is not himself at stake in the investigation. The world is composed of forces, but the scientist is motivated by something quite different—perhaps a love of truth. Or, people operate in self-interest, but we can still trust the law and economics professor to be a fair-minded federal judge. This sort of alienation of the scientist from his own conclusions is unhealthy and undependable. In talking this way and thinking this way, the materialist exempts himself from the implications of his own thinking. The religious traditions are much more holistic in their treatment of scientific investigation. One such example is the book, *Insight*, by the theologian Bernard Lonergan, which studies human understanding itself, including investigations by science of the natural world. Lonergan includes his own thinking in his investigation. Since Lonergan does this, at least in *Insight*, outside any particular doctrinal tradition, we may think of him as an exemplar of what Hallowed Secularism could be like. I don't mean to press this point very far, since Lonergan also wrote *Method in Theology* based in large part on *Insight*, but the point is still valid to an extent. This is the sense in which materialism needs to ground itself in a tradition larger than itself. Materialism needs a larger tradition to account for its own human activity.