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February 26, 2008: The PEW Forum U.S. Religious Landscape Survey

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Title: The PEW Forum U.S. Religious Landscape Survey

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2/26/2008--Many major media are reporting today the PEW Forum Report on the shifting American religious landscape. The Report deals with the difference between childhood religious affiliation and that of adulthood in order to see how Americans change their religious affiliations over their lifetime. The main conclusion of the Report is that Americans do change their religious affiliations. This suggests that Americans take religion seriously and, perhaps, are looking for something.

For purposes of Hallowed Secularism, the Report contains two striking findings. One is the growth over time of the "Unaffiliated" group to its current impressive size and likely future increase. In the Report, this group includes atheists, agnostics, secular unaffiliateds and religious unaffiliateds. The terms are slippery. The Report did not track the growth of this group nationally over time—it only asked about change in an individual's own life from childhood to adulthood—but the Report did include General Social Survey data from 1972-2006 that asked "What is your religious preference? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion, or no religion?" That answer showed the "no religion" group growing from around 5% of the population in 1972 to around 16% in 2006. In the PEW Report itself, the current unaffiliated number is 16% and among persons 18-29, the number is 25%. This means there are a lot of Americans unaffiliated with organized religion and in the future there will be even more.

The second important finding concerns the relationship of this unaffiliated group to religion. The percentage of atheists is small and not growing very much. Atheists are 2% of Americans and even among younger people, only 3%. Some of the unaffiliateds describe themselves as agnostic. But by far the most—3/4's-- of the unaffiliated call themselves "secular" or "religious" unaffiliated. As the New York Times story put it, "The rise of the unaffiliated...does not mean that Americans are becoming less religious." In fact, given the unwillingness of the vast majority of unaffiliated people to call themselves atheists or agnostics, it would seem that these are people looking for religion—just not looking in the usual places.

What is this other place they are looking? The unaffiliated are not looking to Buddhism, indigenous tradition, or New Age religion. Those were all other choices they could have selected in the survey, but did not.

I think I know what the unaffiliated are looking for. I think that many of them are like me. We are looking for religion that is pretty traditional in its orientation. But this would have to be religion that does not demand that we put either our minds or our ethics on hold. I think a lot of the unaffiliated would be willing to look again at the Biblical tradition, as long as it includes respect for science and genuine acceptance of all kinds of people. No fairy tales and no authoritarianism. But plenty of the poetry and mystery of faith.

Hallowed Secularism says we can have all of that. Hallowed Secularism may be what some of the unaffiliated are looking for.