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3-6-2008

### March 6, 2008: Enlightened Tolerance of Post-Enlightenment

Bruce Ledewitz

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Title: Enlightened Tolerance of Post-Enlightenment

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3/6/2008--In the New York Review of Books, 3/6/2008 edition, J.M. Coetzee, 2003 Nobel Prize winner for literature, reviews *Lost Paradise* by Cees Nooteboom. The novel deals with angels or their absence in the world. The book has something to do with the Angel Project in Perth Australia in 2000, in which members of the public were given guided tours and told to look out for angels and indeed some angel actors were provided. In response, some people apparently had angelic visions. This leads Coetzee in the review to consider how even to frame questions today about reality. This is what Coetzee says: "Do angels exist? Does God exist? It is not only in the universe of postmodern fiction that such questions have a quaint, old-fashioned—that is to say, pre-postmodern and perhaps even pre-modern—air. In tolerant, post-Enlightenment societies we are free to make up answers to them as we choose, without risk of punishment. Indeed, in its advanced form the principle of enlightened tolerance simply refuses to take such questions seriously. If God works for you then he must be true (that is to say, true-for-you); and ditto for angels and the rest of the heavenly hierarchy." The problem, though, with not taking such questions seriously, adds Coetzee, is "the plight of the self haunted by a need for ultimate truths in a world from which the gods have withdrawn". The last comment sounds a little like the philosopher Martin Heidegger. I think Coetzee has his finger on the problem but not on its name. The problem is not that we need ultimate truth and there is none. The problem is that we need decisions to questions that we have given up asking. It would be perfectly satisfactory to hold that there is no God, nor are there angels. But it is not satisfactory to suggest that God and angels are matters of opinion. It is not satisfactory both because that way a civilization can end up living in a dream world—like the movie, *The Matrix*—and because history is not a matter of opinion. Whether there is a God or not, there are still slaves and we need to know if reality decrees their freedom.