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### March 7, 2008: Progressive Religion and Hallowed Secularism

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Title: Progressive Religion and Hallowed Secularism

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3/7/2008--I received a criticism of Hallowed Secularism this week, in the name of, and on behalf of, "progressive religion". The criticism was twofold. First, my description of organized religion is said to be outdated. Progressive religion, which is to say liberal Jews and Christians in this context, have gone beyond the supernatural—God as a being beyond time and space, miracles, after-life and so forth. Process theology has already done that.

Second, Hallowed Secularism is cognitive—it is ideas about God and about the rest of theology. But progressives regard this sort of approach to religion as trivial. Religion is better expressed through art and ritual.

I have mixed feelings about this critique. On the one hand, I don't wish to attack progressive religion in any way. While I don't think progressive religion of this sort is tenable, I would be the first to benefit if it were, because then I could remain in Judaism. Plus, progressive Christians and Jews are my natural political allies on many fronts.

Nevertheless, let me, just this once, respond. There are two kinds of "progressive religion" in our cultural terms. One type is theologically conservative but politically liberal. In this category you can put people like Jim Wallis, Stanley Hauerwas, John Milbank and Pope Benedict. On some cultural issues, such as abortion and gay marriage, such persons may not be progressive at all. But on core economic issues, international affairs, militarism and the environment, such persons are likely to be more radical—because their thinking is grounded in the Kingdom of God—than any merely political alternative can be.

The other kind of progressive religion is both theologically and politically liberal. Obviously, I am painting with a very broad brush, since new theological thinking may not fit into these categories. But the critic had in mind liberal theology of a certain kind—skeptical of any supernatural concepts. For that is true of Hallowed Secularism as well and the point the critic was making was that Hallowed Secularism is not breaking any new ground.

This latter kind of progressive Christian and Jewish religion seems to me to have shown itself as insubstantial. It has few followers. It does not work as Christian thought because the empty tomb cannot be regarded as mere metaphor. That Christian truth is meant to be historical, even if mysterious. Jesus really must have arisen from the dead. Discovering Jesus' remains would be a Christian catastrophe.

Nor has this kind of religion worked in Judaism. Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan's formulation--God is the power that makes the good possible—is the sort of naturalism that the critic has in mind. But, as anyone familiar with Reconstructionist Judaism can attest, Reconstructionist Judaism has failed to incorporate such non-theistic understanding into prayer and liturgy. The language of the Old Testament undermines the Kaplan approach. In the Old Testament, God speaks and wills. God is not a force or structure.

To the critic, none of this is that important, since religion is not about theological ideas. Part of the point of progressive religion is to resist the Enlightenment emphasis on reason. But this non-cognitive approach has led in progressive Christian and Jewish practice to outlandish and nostalgic gestures. In Jewish synagogues, people now cover their heads with their talitot (prayer shawls) during the Sh'ma and people are routinely named in prayers for healing that were rarely done before. Jewish renewal ritual forms, for example, are boring. In progressive churches, prayers are longer and more people are remembered in prayers, than ever before. I find all this inflated and over-emotional.

And it is over-emotional for a reason--because it lacks the rigor of thinking. The great critic of Enlightenment narrow intellectuality was the philosopher Martin Heidegger. But Heidegger was careful to say, in the "Letter on Humanism," that he was not renouncing "the rigor of thinking" and putting in its place "the arbitrariness of drives and feelings", thus proclaiming irrationalism. But the sort of progressive religion the critic was raising risks doing exactly that.

Certainly religion is more than dogma and more than ideas, especially more than ideological commitments. But it does not do to say of God, "whatever we mean by that". It is not progressive in any sense to give up the fundamental question, what is reality and what, if anything, is behind it? Yes, Hallowed Secularism takes that question with utmost seriousness. Hallowed Secularism is not content to substitute for that thinking, any form of art and liturgy.