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Title: Liberal Religion and Hallowed Secularism

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6/5/2008--I received another piece of criticism yesterday concerning Hallowed Secularism and my understanding of Christian theology as that of an "absolute and wholly transcendent God acting in the world." In other words, I left Judaism because I did not believe in such a God and I write as if that belief is central to the biblical tradition. But, I am being told, there are many Jews and Christians—and presumably Muslims as well—who do not believe in such a God concept, but who stay within these religious traditions by reinterpretation of this traditional image of God. My work for Hallowed Secularism, therefore, seems to side with conservatives in these religions who are forever asking the liberals to either toe the theological line or leave.

At first, this challenge to Hallowed Secularism amazed me. Obviously I was not criticizing people for staying "inside". After all, I had been inside Judaism all my life and leaving was no easy matter. I am happy for people who can stay. I left Judaism only because I had to. I just couldn't keep doing the translating anymore from traditional image to something else. Anyway, the people I am trying to reach are not in the churches and synagogues and have no interest in such places. I did not think of myself as criticizing liberal religion.

But now that this has happened on several occasions, I must take the matter more seriously. Clearly, if something like Hallowed Secularism were possible, some of these religious liberals would leave their religious traditions. They stay now because leaving seems to cut them off altogether from the biblical tradition. If leaving the church did not necessarily have that effect, as Hallowed Secularism seems to suggest, such people might leave.

So, I now have to take responsibility for this unintended possibility. I therefore turned to my teacher in the biblical tradition: C.S. Lewis, for his view on this matter. Lewis says, not surprisingly, that Christianity (and the same might be said in Judaism, but not so clearly) is "precisely the story of one grand miracle." (God in the Dock, page 80). Take away the miraculous and there is nothing left beyond moralisms that everyone would agree with. And if you reject the kind of God who can perform miracles in principle, you should not call yourself a Christian.

Just to be clear about this, Lewis considered some of the Bible to be what he called "fabulous", as in fairy tales to teach lessons. Noah's Ark was like that for Lewis, for example. But Lewis emphasized what such a view did not imply—"we believe...in a spirit-world which can, and does, invade the natural or phenomenal universe." (69).

Lewis also recognized that some of the Biblical writers may have thought of a three tiered universe that a modern mind is bound to reject (as I think either Marcus Borg or John Dominic Crossan emphasizes). But for Lewis, this is detail, not essence. Any language about the "crucified Master [who is] now the supreme Agent of the unimaginable Power on whom the whole universe depends" will be open to the same objection as that of heaven being "up". "Enters" is no better than "comes down" and "re-absorbed" no better than "ascended". Our language doesn't work here very well.

After reading Lewis, I feel more at peace. Lewis would disagree with my decision to leave the religious institutions. He would tell me to worship by means of myth if that is all I can do, (page 67)--to treat God as poetry or theater if that is as close as I can get. But Lewis would tell me not to water down the essential religious message and pretend I had made no change in it. That is what I think some of my critics are doing.