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August 13, 2008: James C. Edwards—Philosopher of Hallowed Secularism

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Title: James C. Edwards—Philosopher of Hallowed Secularism

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8/11/2008--I have just finished a gem of a book: *The Plain Sense of Things: the Fate of Religion in an Age of Normal Nihilism* (Penn State 1997) by James C. Edwards, Professor of Philosophy at Furman University. On a deep level, Edwards is trying to describe a religious, post-dogmatic way of life very similar to the goal and framework of Hallowed Secularism. This is how Edwards describes his quest: "On some philosophers religious hardly registers; on others (I am one of them) it sits like a stone. ...In this book I have been trying to find a way of being religious that's still possible (or maybe the word is 'decent') for us. ...What would it be like to be religious when we can't really believe any of that glorious stuff—creation ex nihilo, virgin birth, bodily resurrection—we used to believe?" Edwards says our culture is characterized by normal nihilism. Religion in this context is a contingent value like everything else. It is not the truth. This condition can lead to unleashed humanism that destroys the planet or numbing conformity. In the past, religion has been able with its sacraments to combine a sense that human will is limited by something greater and a call away from the pieties of the world to a deeper and truer and richer life. Edwards tries to find that other way in philosophy, specifically Martin Heidegger's call to dwell poetically on the earth as a mortal, which Edwards unpacks. He begins with Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* as an example of the life practices he has in mind. This is not at all nature worship. His answer is living truthfully, which means someone's life becoming transparent to itself. We must express in our lives the conditions of life that made us and an appreciation that new meanings can come to be. This is the work of disciplined imagination. Well, you'll have to read the book. It's the beginning of a new kind of theology for a secular age.