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9-28-2008

September 28: 2008: Repentance

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Title: Repentance

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9/28/2008--As I enter on the High Holy Days this year, perhaps my first as a bona fide secularist and not a Jew, I see the importance of religion more than ever. When critics of religion, such as Christopher Hitchens and the other New Atheists, talk about it, they emphasize empty ritual, absurd beliefs and violence. But the two aspects of religion they do not mention are the shape of history and forgiveness of sin. Every religion gives an account of what history means. What is important about this is not so much the account as the significance of the question. Religion makes it hard for us to live without thinking about what our lives mean in the larger picture. Of course, at the season of the High Holy Days forgiveness of sin is the primary mode of thought. I know already that secularism does not even contain this category. To seek forgiveness of sin is first of all to acknowledge how far we live from holiness, or authenticity if you prefer the non-religious sounding term. John Dewey might say to remember yourself at your very best, that is, most generous, loving and brave, and then measure your meager everyday living. This is sin. To seek forgiveness also means to seek it from outside oneself. Some people think we forgive ourselves too readily. I think, instead, we can hardly forgive ourselves at all. In either case, we cannot be the source of forgiveness. Nor can other human beings be the source of forgiveness. The Jewish tradition requires that we seek forgiveness from those we have wronged (though I rarely see that practiced and I don't practice it). But the focus is on forgiveness from God. Human forgiveness is treacherous. It can be just another form of violence. The secularist does not have a God to grant forgiveness. If I could make one change in secularism it would be to convince my fellow secularists that forgiveness of sins happens. One must only ask with penitence. How this could be possible since there is no God, I do not know.