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November 25, 2008: The Habit of Hope

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11/25/2008 Today is Thanksgiving. I am reminded that this is the one holiday about which religious believers and nonbelievers do not quarrel. Thanksgiving is beyond the culture wars. This is the cultural option we need more of. At the moment, the believer and the nonbeliever see themselves as apart, really as enemies. This is not true, however. Even the Pope last week was misinterpreted. On certain matters there cannot be dialogue among the religions. On others, yes there can be, he said. But there is no threat in this. Our religions must remain as they are or they could not teach us secularists anything. Their dogmas are their own. Out of this does not come synthesis, but variety: a secularism that has learned from all the religions. Thanksgiving is a gift to the secular world from the religious world. That is how we should think of the religions in general, as gifts. I am finally finishing Ursula LeGuin's book, *The Dispossessed*. It is remarkable and I recommend it to you. The book tries to imagine genuinely different human societies. At its center is a colony that tries to live a nonauthoritarian communism, a real anarchy. The book is not a pitch for this; it is not like Robert Heinlein's 1966 ad for libertarianism, *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*. No human society avoids flaws. What LeGuin's book is really about is hope. In the book, humanity has ceased to hope. The physicist Shevek sees hope as somehow present in the structure of time. This is his new understanding of physics. Hope is another gift from Our Religions, or some of them. When a politician like Barack Obama comes along and offers just a little of it, our thirst for hope comes rushing out. But hope does not come in the form of this or that person. It has to be believed in as a possibility, out of faith. Life can be really different. A secular society that thinks it is at war with religion, with the very notion of faith, is going to have a hard time sustaining hope. So we had better not become that kind of secular society.