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Hallowed Secularism

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### February 4, 2009: What is History Like?

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Title: What is History Like?

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2/4/2009—One of the difficulties in developing Hallowed Secularism, both in thinking about it and in actually laying the foundation for a healthy secular civilization, is to understand the relationship of religion to history. Many secularists can accept “spirituality” as a genuine aspect of the human condition. Hence the description often heard that a person is “spiritual, but not religious.” But history as a category is not as easily accepted. The monotheistic religions are intensely historically oriented. Justice triumphs in the end, though as with the Hebrew slavery in Egypt, it may take longer than an individual’s lifespan for that to happen. Here is how Arnold Eisen, Chancellor of The Jewish Theological Seminary put it this reflecting on the surprising inauguration of President Barack Obama: “History is like this, the Rabbis taught: generation after generation and event after event accumulate without apparent recompense for sacrifice. History seems to lack purpose. It appears stalled. Then, ‘all of a sudden,’ something happens: things move. Setbacks follow. There is more work to do, more suffering to bear, more wilderness to slog through; but the fact that redemption happened once gives us hope. We wake up to the blessing of a new day and, free to stretch and stand tall, we accept the privilege to open eyes and push back walls. History seems malleable once again.” Our religions promise liberation. Some of our religions see that liberation in history. Materialism cannot make that claim. For it, history is just one thing after another. Even humanism has trouble with the category of history since everything depends on human beings. Our religions teach that the slave will go free and that this is etched in the heart of reality. Thomas Jefferson, religious to his core in this regard, once called this the book of fate. Martin Luther King, Jr., called it the moral arc of the universe. We must be sure that our secular civilization does not lose this sense of justice in history. Religion is more than the spirituality of the individual.