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March 5, 2009: Impressions from Day 1 of the New School Religion/Secular Conference

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Title: Impressions from Day 1 of the New School Religion/Secular Conference

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3/5/2009--Greetings from NYC, where the New School for Social Research is hosting a Conference on the U.S case of the religious/secular divide. Many big names are on the program and the presentations are impressive. Yet, my overwhelming reaction is disappointment.

I thought coming in that the point of the Conference would be to examine the presumptions of secularism and assess their adequacy. Thus, religion and secularism would appear as equals, and the worldview of each would be subject to critique. There were panelists who could have done this, such as Jose Casanova, who spoke on Secularism as an ideology.

Instead, the Conference has treated secularism as already an adequate way of encountering the world, without even raising the question of whether that is truly so. The organizers seem to share that view and those attending the Conference also seem to share it.

This is important to me because my efforts to reform secularism, to open it up to religious insight, are dependent on an understanding that secularism's assumptions are not simply naively true. Thus, my recent post on Huffington (The Fight for the Soul of Secularism, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bruce-ledewitz/the-fight-for-the-soul-of_b_171629.html) was met with the usual comments about people creating their own meaning and values, the emptiness of spiritual experience, and the harm and irrationality of religion. I thought this high-powered Conference would begin the process of throwing these, and other, assumptions into question.

It has been quite the opposite. The most powerful voices at the Conference have been Charles Taylor and Daniel Dennett. Dennett presented his usually powerful coherent defense of materialism and science as whatall that is real. ("What you are, your presumed self, is actually an alliance of machines in your brain"). There was no one to take him on at that level, no one to expose the hidden, and not even hidden, ontology that Dennett is pushing. There was no one who even tried to show that these assumptions are not themselves science, but faith claims.

Taylor was even worse in a way. He proposed dissolving the religious realm altogether, leaving all claims of conscience on an equal footing before the secular state. Taylor could not see that his vaunted value of the neutral state is impossible and even silly, since the state already endorses capitalism and nationalism, among many other values.

This became very clear when, in response to a question from the audience, Taylor stated that an uncompromising pro-life position is anti-democratic, presumably because it refuses to put the personhood of the unborn to a vote and genuinely accept the result. Taylor would have called Lincoln anti-democratic because Lincoln refused to accept Douglas' proposal of popular sovereignty as the answer to the slavery issue. One cannot vote on the humanity of the slave, answered Lincoln. The membership of the human family is a precondition of democracy, not an issue democracy can resolve. Just so in abortion. Fundamentally, the two sides differ over who is a human being. Democracy functions only after that question is resolved. Neither side in that debate is more democratic than the other. My objection is that Taylor's defense of neutrality and conscience masks just such power-plays and not just about abortion.