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March 19, 2009: Hallowed Secularism—Hints and Portents

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Title: Hallowed Secularism—Hints and Portents

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3/19/2009--Sometimes it appears that Hallowed Secularism is catching on. Here is one such portent. Theodore Ziolkowski, Professor Emeritus at Princeton, has written *Modes of Faith: Secular Surrogates for Lost Religious Belief* (U. Chi. 2007). I just read a beautiful review of what must be a wonderful book by David Jasper in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. Jasper is an Anglican priest and theologian, and currently Professor in Literature and Theology at the University of Glasgow, Scotland. Jasper writes that Ziolkowski is doing what a number of writers are doing, "trac[ing] the dissolution of forms of belief and the emergence of alternatives that mark not so much the absence of religion but the exploration of new options and avenues that might sustain the hunger for belief and meaning in contemporary life." Ziolkowski does this in a unique way, through literature of an earlier period, that of the late 19th and early 20th century. He looks at 30 writers of the period who display a loss of faith in religion, usually Christianity. Ziolkowski finds "new modes of faith" through these writers, all sorts of things, from eastern religion to socialism to art to even reconversion. The keynote of this book, writes Jasper, "is failure." "We cannot do with religion and a 'mode of faith,' but neither can we do without them. Utopias become dystopias, the vision corrupts, art becomes an escape, India a dream, myth a word that we continually seek to recover as valid, but then inevitably it slips back into the negative as in I Timothy 1:4, in which we are bidden not to waste time on myths and endless speculations. Even the renewal of old ways seems to offer little genuine consolation in a disenchanting, fragmented world." Hopeless and harsh. Yet, why does Ziolkowski bother to write? The old hope does not disappear.