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October 4, 2009: I Left Judaism Because I am Ross Douthat and not Karen Armstrong

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Title: I Left Judaism Because I am Ross Douthat and not Karen Armstrong

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10/4/2009—In today's New York Times book review section, there is a wonderful moment in Ross Douthat's review of Karen Armstrong's new book *The Case for God*. Douthat rather praises Armstrong's description of an important tradition in the monotheistic faiths: the pursuit of an unknowable Deity "to be approached through myth, ritual and 'apophatic' theology, which practices 'a deliberate and principled reticence about God and/or the sacred.'" Religion is not something to be thought but something to be done. Religion in the West lost this "knack" because it tried to emulate the truth claims of science, which has now led to bizarre attempts to prove the Bible's compatibility with modern scientific theories. Armstrong shows that most of the Church fathers, for example, did not read Genesis literally, the way that many so-called conservatives do today.

Douthat does not dispute what Armstrong describes—he apparently agrees that much conservative religion is know-nothing—but he disputes Armstrong's ultimate conclusion: that the three monotheisms were essentially liberal religions prior to the scientific age: "It's true that Augustine...did not interpret the early books of Genesis literally. But he certainly endorsed a literal reading of Jesus' resurrection."

But then Douthat makes a different point, not that liberal religion is less true but that it is less fulfilling and sustainable. "It's possible to gain some sort of 'knack' for a religion without believing that all its dogmas are literally true: a spiritually inclined person can no doubt draw nourishment from the Roman Catholic Mass without believing that the Eucharist literally becomes the body and blood of Christ. But without the doctrine of transubstantiation, the Mass would not exist to provide that nourishment. Not every churchgoer will share Flannery O'Connor's opinion that if the Eucharist is 'a symbol, to hell with it.' But the Catholic faith has endured for 2,000 years because of Flannery O'Connors, not Karen Armstrongs.

This explains why liberal religion tends to be parasitic on more dogmatic forms of faith, which create and sustain the practices that the liberal believer picks and chooses from, reads symbolically and reinterprets for a more enlightened age. Such spiritual dilettant-ism has its charms, but it lacks the sturdy appeal of Western monotheism... ."

Douthat describes essentially my feelings about Judaism. My "faith" is probably very close to that of Armstrong, but it finally seemed false to me to describe it as Judaism. So I call it Hallowed Secularism, which seems more faithful to the break between my beliefs and those of the ancient rabbis. Or, to put it another way, whether God performs miracles or not, they did not doubt that he could do so if he wished. For me, miracles, and the kind of God who could perform them, are ruled out in principle.

This agreement does not mean that the kind of religion Douthat describes is actually possible in the long run. Religion cannot exist if it is inconsistent with the given certainties of the age.