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November 15, 2009: When Scientists Speak of God

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Title: When Scientists Speak of God

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11/15/2009--The following is part of a draft of a chapter in my new book, Higher Law in the Public Square. This section follows a reference to the bleak worldview of Steven Weinberg, to the effect that we live in a cold indifferent universe. When scientists do use the word God, it seems to me they do so to express an attitude toward the universe quite different from that of Weinberg. Certainly that was true of Albert Einstein in his famous comment about God playing dice with the universe. He did not mean a personal God, like a being, apart from space and time, who could and did intervene to set aside the natural order according to his will. He meant that the universe was an orderly place, with an intelligible structure, one that welcomed human investigation. Einstein may just have been wrong about quantum theory suggesting otherwise. It is not a "fact" that the universe is a cold, indifferent place in which humans happen to be, by accident. Beings like us, thinking, loving beings, may instead be "inevitable", as Conway Morris puts it, given the natural processes we know and sufficient time. And if humanity is alone, in the sense that there is no God to talk to, then we are alone in a home well suited to us, where we are meant to be. That is not a bad place to be. Scientists are tempted to think of the orderly structure of nature as planned. And even to think in God-like terms. Here is how the great physicist Werner Heisenberg put it, with full recognition of the pitfalls of such thinking: "Was it utterly absurd to seek behind the ordering structures of this world a 'consciousness' whose 'intentions' were these very structures? Of course, even to put this question was an anthropomorphic lapse, since the word "consciousness" was, after all, based purely on human experience, and ought therefore to be restricted to the human realm. But in that case we would also be wrong to speak of animal consciousness, when we have a strong feeling that we can do so significantly. We sense that the meaning of 'consciousness' becomes wider and at the same time vaguer if we try to apply outside the human realm." And why restrict this sense of fitting order to nature in a physical sense? This is how Pope Benedict, writing before becoming Pope, described the movement from the natural order to the order of natural rights: "If 'nature' is being talked about here, then what is meant is not just a system of biological processes. ... Being is not blindly material, so that one might shape it in accordance with sheer utilitarian aims. Nature bears spirit within it, bears ethical and value and dignity, and thus at the same time constitutes the legal claim to our liberation and the standard for this." All of this relates to the question before us, the use of the term God. God does not just mean Justice Scalia's Creator/Ruler. God consist of a family of meanings, of which that is certainly one aspect. But just as important is a much vaguer sense of order and