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November 21, 2009: The Young Don't Read the Bible

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Title: The Young Don't Read the Bible

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11/21/2009—The title above is not a criticism, just an observation. I was very pleased a few weeks ago to receive an invitation to visit Indiana University of Pennsylvania to speak with students in a Philosophy of Religion Class that had read and was discussing my book, *Hallowed Secularism*. The course is being taught by Bill Gibson, a gifted teacher. A week ago, my wife Patt and I drove the interminable way east from Pittsburgh. (Indiana Pennsylvania must be the origin of the line, "you can't get there from here".) Some of the students had come back for a Saturday, which is way beyond the call of duty, and other faculty members graciously attended as well. We were impressed by the commitment of the university community to the shared intellectual life. The students were a delight. They seemed mostly to be nonbelievers, whether churchgoers or not. That is no surprise among the young. Sometimes people go back to the religion of their youth later in life. Bill calls this the religious lockbox syndrome of college life. What was more surprising is that most of the students seemed to have little acquaintance with the Bible, and less interest in studying it. This is both a problem for someone like me and an opportunity. It is a problem because *Hallowed Secularism* is a biblically oriented book. Though the book addresses other religions, it is primarily about the value of the Judeo-Christian tradition even when someone does not believe in God or other religious doctrines. If someone does not know the tradition, that is a very hard sell. On the other hand, the opportunity is that these students are not really hostile to the Bible, because they know so little about it. They assume the Bible is violent and backward, but it is not a passionate commitment. Most of them are not like the New Atheists, living to defeat religion. Since religion requires the continuity of a tradition, these students suggest that we may drift into secularism as a society in part out of unfamiliarity with religious sources. How does all this square with the large numbers of students engaged in activities like campus crusades for Christ? That was even the case at Indiana. According to the students in the room, a lot of the students involved in the Crusade are like them, not really religious heretofore. They knew little about Jesus and were swept along by enthusiasm for something that seemed exciting. This may mean that one can also drift into religious enthusiasm. The only solid foundation for secularism or religion is knowledge. Nothing else can last or be really healthy.