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### February 22, 2010: God is easy, death is hard

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Title: God is easy, death is hard

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2/22/2010—Happy Washington's birthday. There is an old story about a British actor (it is not clear who the speaker actually was) on his deathbed who was asked what dying was like. He replied, "Dying is easy, comedy is hard." This story is brought to mind because of a study of the beliefs of 18-29 year olds, released on Wednesday, 2/17, by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. This group, dubbed the Millennials, showed themselves to be much less affiliated with religion than older Americans and less affiliated than Generation X and baby boomers had been at similar points in their lives (people tend to become more religious as they age). What is odd about the report is the gap between belief in God or a universal spirit, on the one hand, and belief in an afterlife, heaven and miracles, on the other. Only 64% reported themselves to be "absolutely certain" about belief in God or a universal spirit, whereas 75% believe in an afterlife, 74% in heaven and 78% in miracles. The gap is really much greater than at first appears because some of the respondents believe in a universal spirit, which presumably lacks the capacity of action associated with an orthodox belief in God. Thus, some of this group do not believe in God, but believe in aspects of reality usually associated only with God traditionally understood. For example, no one disputes that our brains die at biological death. For our personalities to continue to exist after death, there must be some exception to the material basis of our lives. The traditional God could ordain such a result, of course, but nothing else could. Whatever you may think of Christianity, it is not magic thinking. The God of the Bible is the sovereign of the universe. He makes ethical and ceremonial demands. He punishes and rewards. He is not a fairy tale. But when someone disengages the miracles God can accomplish from God, then how could these exceptions to the laws of nature come about? I worry about this coming generation. Back to the joke. The concept of God can always be reinterpreted to express nontheological beliefs. One can believe in the absolute. One can trust in the beneficence of the universe. One can attribute divinity to cosmic processes. Thus, God is easy. With enough interpretation, anyone can say I believe in God or I don't believe in God. But death is either the end of us or it is not. The real definition of the secularist is one who says, "I know my existence ends forever with my death." Apparently some people want things both ways. Death says they cannot have everything. We can dispute what God means, but not what death means.