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April 10, 2010: So, What is Wrong with Liberal Religion?

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Title: So, What is Wrong with Liberal Religion?

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4/10/2010—In my last blog entry, I asked whether the kind of liberal religion evinced by Jon Meacham in a recent book review is sustainable in the long run. I answered, no. But there is another issue here. I often find myself criticizing efforts like those of Meacham. Yet I wrote plainly in *Hallowed Secularism* that I had no problem with liberal religion, that I practiced it myself for years, and that I was supportive of people who managed to stay in our religions, even though eventually I felt I had to leave. It is obvious that I do think there is something wrong with liberal religion. And the problem with it cannot really be that it is destined to fade away, which is what Mark Lilla wrote in his book, *The Stillborn God*. Certainly I am in no position to criticize that. *Hallowed Secularism*, my position, does not even exist yet. I think what bothers me about liberal religion—that is, people who don't really believe in the supernatural claims of a religious tradition but who go on attending and practicing more or less as if nothing had changed—is that they are blocking the future. Meacham apparently attends church and continuously translates what is being said there into some sort of acceptable alternative. Or, worse, he just lets it all wash over him as what he calls a mystery even though he does not accept what is being claimed. That is not a sustaining way of life. Religion must be a full, passionate commitment, including the viscera, as William Connolly puts it in *Why I am Not a Secularist*. Religion must include the nonrational elements of awe, wonder and worship. Religion must be something worth dying for. Some atheists would say that this is precisely why we should not have religion. Suicide bombers have something worth dying for. That is the problem. But a human life of tepid materialism, which is what New York Times columnist David Brooks said is great, in an April 5 column (he wrote, "Educated Americans grow up in a culture of moral materialism" and he meant it as a compliment) is not a life. It will be rejected by the young eventually. It is not how America was founded. We were not a Christian nation, but we were a nation founded on a powerful truth about human freedom, a truth our founders thought worth dying for. I admit that I do not yet foresee this new way of life that replaces religion in a way that is humanly satisfying. But, liberal religion is not it and currently siphons off energy and intelligence that should be devoted to helping us find a way into the future. That is what is wrong with liberal religion.