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### November 20, 2010: The Task of Secularism

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Title: The Task of Secularism

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11/20/2010—I was asked by my friend and teacher, Robert Taylor, to at least outline my philosophy of religion. Even to ask that question is to assume that all of our religions are pointing toward a, or the, truth of reality, something like the old story about blind people describing what an elephant is like when they only touch one part.

The suggestion that each of our religions has only a part of a larger truth is not, of course, how the religions usually describe themselves, but it is not a totally alien idea either. Each religion has an account of persons of good faith who are not members of the religion. In no religion I know of are all such outside persons totally abandoned. Even the strict evangelical Christian form that teaches no salvation outside the son after being born again has a place for anyone who did not have a fair chance to know the Gospel.

At another time I will share my response to Robert. For now, I will just say that it had to do with the concept, from Heidegger, of *gelassenheit*. That term means “releasement”. In German, it is not a technical, philosophical word. *Gelassenheit* is used to describe what might be called in English, “keeping cool”.

All of the religions approach reality from the perspective of trust in its ultimate goodness or at least knowable order. All of them assume that reality is responsive to the extent that a proper way of human life can be in accord with the goodness or order of reality. In other words, there are better and worse ways for humans to live. And all of them place human doing below the fundamental workings of reality. All of this is captured in the old Protestant phrase, “Let go and let God”.

Assuming that there is any truth in my account of religion, and that it can be corrected and improved where inadequate, the task of secularism is to decide these fundamental matters for itself, which means for each and every one of our selves. Then we will have a philosophy of secularism, which will amount to a philosophy of ultimate reality, which will amount to philosophy. That does not mean anything technical. It just means deciding the truth of existence or in the words of the old movie *Alfie*, “what’s it all about?” This is the existential question for every human being. One’s life is either an intentional or a passive answer to the question of what reality is. It is impossible to avoid the question even if one does not consciously address it.

There are actually not that many fundamental orientations to existence available. The religious one I have described might be true. On the other hand, Humanism might say that humans make their own meaning, more or less at will out of a fairly plastic and indifferent reality. Relativism might deny the possibility of this kind of search for truth. Nihilism would do the same, more radically. And there are subvariants, such as materialism or life as the search for pleasure or the doing of one’s duty or even just following convention.

The task of secularism is to think seriously about this and to decide, first for myself, of course, but then socially. In other words, from the nature of reality and the appropriate human response, we can get to the nature of the good society.

That is not a dictatorial approach. Undoubtedly certain human ways of organizing society, such as democracy and liberty are appropriate to many and conflicting philosophies of existence. But secularists have the task of thinking about social forms for secularists in larger groups.

Up until now, it has been assumed, as Austin Dacey seems to assume, that the only appropriate form of life for secularism is individualism. But that is an assumption. And a bad one. It assumes that each secularist makes his or her own way in the world without any structures for education and community that other secularists have consciously created for other secularists. Maybe that will turn out to be right. But I think it will lead to alienation and demoralization and ultimately will reinforce poor forms of human life, such as consumption and nationalism.

Anyway, that is a discussion for the future. First is the task of secular self-consciousness. We are secular and not religious. We must address the question of the truth of existence.