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April 16, 2011: The Importance of Objective Morality

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4/16/2011—On April 7, at Notre Dame, Sam Harris debated the philosopher of religion William Lane on the topic of whether God is the source of morality. (report here from Notre Dame magazine). For my purposes we learn two things from this debate, regardless of the answer to the question. The first is that some secularists think it very important that there be something objective in morality, that not everything we call right and wrong be merely a matter of opinion, time and culture. Second, we learn that religious believers do strongly associate God with the concept of objective morality. Since these two propositions are at the heart of Church, State, and the Crisis in American Secularism, I believe I won this debate. The idea that “one Nation under God” can actually have the public meaning of one Nation subject to moral norms—and conscious of that fact—is not a dream or a fiction. It is a message embedded in that formulation. So, if it is an important message, why not allow government sometimes at least to put it that way? [I must add that I think of “God” as a symbol of our belief that justice and other values are real, that is objective in some sense. If we think of God as a being who “made” objective morality and guarantees it, as William Lane seems to suggest, then we have the odd problem of whether God is himself subject to the moral norms that he created. Or, as Abraham asks God in Genesis, shall not the Judge of all the world do right? (or better in the Hebrew, shall not the Justice of all the world do justice?)]