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August 26, 2011: Rethinking Secularism or Enjoying It?

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Title: Rethinking Secularism or Enjoying It?

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8/26/2011—Two books are out that illustrate differing approaches to secular life. One is *The Joy of Secularism* (Princeton), which I discussed in a prior post. That book, according to reviews (it's coming to our library), considers how to live a fulfilled life within secularism. But the book assumes that the boundary between secularism and religion is clear, even obvious. The second book, *Rethinking Secularism* (Oxford) is not so sure about this. Secularism is a something, but it is not at all clear what that something is. The bifurcation of the world between the secular and the religious is a question. My earlier book, *Hallowed Secularism*, tried to show that the person who lives outside organized religious life can greatly benefit from the wisdom and teachings of the religions. There is a reason that this is true. There is, after all, only one reality. We live our lives accompanied by beliefs about that reality. We call some of those beliefs religious and some something else, perhaps scientific. But religious life and secular life are both dealing with that one reality. I think it is not clear at all what the boundary is between the secular and the religious. In America we think it is clear because Christianity and Judaism have developed beliefs about a supernatural realm—still of course a claim about reality, about what is real—that cannot be true from a certain scientific perspective. Fair enough. But not all religions share those kinds of beliefs and some Christians and Jews struggle to make sense of them. Conversely, some secularists are materialists, even reductionists. But this worldview cannot even account for consciousness. Not all secularists look at reality in that way. Can a secular life be holy? That is the question. Is it a religious question or a secular one?