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July 31, 2012: The Renewal of Christianity

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Title: The Renewal of Christianity

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7/31/2012—At the end of his excellent book, *Bad Religion*, Ross Douthat raises the question of the renewal of Christianity, essentially in America. Now, while I can see that Douthat does not entirely understand Christianity—he fails to come to grips with its historical evils, for example, and is a little too happy to invoke mystery that one does not sense really challenges his rational side—he has a good feel for what is important and what is not in any religion. Douthat writes that renewal must come from holiness and beauty. If the Church—remember, this is really a defense of Catholicism—cannot inspire holiness and beauty in her followers, then Christianity is moribund. But this is not just true for Christianity. It is true for secular civilization as well. There is a reason the E.L. Doctorow's character in *City of God* called for a "hallowed secularism," one at home with the sacred. And that is why I so named my book and this blog. If secularism is to flourish, it also must engage the holy and the beautiful (I failed to engage the beautiful in my book). How? The art of secularism is neither truly beautiful nor at all holy. Think for example of the art of Andy Warhol or Damien Hirst. Julian Bell rightly entitled his review of the Hirst exhibition going on in London, *Brimming with Sheer Cheek*, in the *New York Review of Books*. This is witty art. At its heart is a fear of death, but no response to death. What is the holy in secularism? Is it just opposition to the superstition of religion, freeing the human mind? Certainly it is that. But those pictures from space and of space—they certainly inspire awe. They are beautiful and they somehow suggest our place in the universe. To this, the monotheistic traditions respond, but what about me? Does the universe care about me? Here we see the harm that monotheism does. The answer is no, in a sense. There is no person there in the form of the universe to love us like a parent. But the universe certainly cares for us and provides for us. It is our genuine home. In any event, these are the questions a renewed secularism must ask, along with Douthat—where is the holy and the beautiful in our lives?