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Title: Transformed Without God

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2/24/2015—The question is often asked, and resented by the religiously unaffiliated, can you be good without God? Obviously you can, say those who call themselves nonbelievers.

It's the wrong question, for two reasons. First, religious practitioners are not good. They are terrible sinners. Just ask their traditions. The word "good" here means, I haven't killed anybody. It does not mean I have lived in dedication to others, to truth, in depth or anything else. It does not even mean I have been faithful to those around me. It does not mean anything important. Jesus said, why do you call me good?

So we're not good and that is related to the second point—the question of life is not ethics. The question is transformation and human possibility. Organized religion is not too good at that. But non-organized religion is terrible at it.

To illustrate this, listen to how Phil Zuckerman describes secular life in his new book, *Living the Secular Life*—(by the way, I got this from a book review by Susan Jacoby in the *New York Times*) "He extols a secular morality grounded in the 'empathetic reciprocity embedded in the Golden Rule, accepting the inevitability of our eventual death, navigating life with a sober pragmatism grounded in this world.'"

Now nothing about this is terrible. But it is boring. It's proud of itself for accepting that we die. But Martin Heidegger long ago spoke of authentic human life as being toward death—*sein zum toda*. Indeed, Cicero described philosophy as learning to die. This is not new and Zuckerman's take, extolling pragmatism, is empty. What is pragmatic if I'm going to die anyway? Does pragmatism mean reasonably self-regarding but not hurting anybody, at least not doing so outside normal limits? Why not just quote Google—don't be evil?

But Google can be sinister, too. Good people are monsters sometime. Maybe most of the time.

Now, contrast this with the call to enlightenment in Eastern religion. Or the call to self-sacrifice in Christianity—he who would save his life will lose it. And what about living in depth, in art, for example? Or devotion to truth? Or anything that would make life worthwhile?

There is a view in secular thought that the problem with human life is the belief in transformative possibility itself, that such a view leads to death camps. This view was stated classically and elegantly by Isaiah Berlin. I just reread [A Message to the 21st Century](#) in the *New York Review of Books*, which says this specifically:

"Let me explain. If you are truly convinced that there is some solution to all human problems, that one can conceive an ideal society which men can reach if only they do what is necessary to attain it, then you and your followers must believe that no price can be too high to pay in order to open the gates of such a paradise.

The root conviction which underlies this is that the central questions of human life, individual or social, have one true answer which can be discovered. ... This is the idea of which I spoke, and what I wish to tell you is that it is false.

So what is to be done to restrain the champions, sometimes very fanatical, of one or other of these values, each of whom tends to trample upon the rest, as the great tyrants of the twentieth century have trampled on the life, liberty, and human rights of millions because their eyes were fixed upon some ultimate golden future?

I am afraid I have no dramatic answer to offer: only that if these ultimate human values by which we live are to be pursued, then compromises, trade-offs, arrangements have to be made if the worst is not to happen.”

Berlin admits that his view “is not a flag under which idealistic and enthusiastic young men and women may wish to march.” His view “does not engage the generous emotions... .” But it will keep you from killing anybody and may to a certain extent improve the world.

This is the dead air of positivism. It is Phil Zuckerman’s air also. And I want to tell you that if all you can aim at is not killing anybody, you will not even succeed at that.