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Title: Going After Faith

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4/12/2015—I have always thought that Philip Kitcher is the best of the New Atheists. That is the group that came to the consciousness of the American public around ten years ago arguing against religion. The first wave of the movement culminated in the late Christopher Hitchens' blockbuster, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. Other well known members of the group were Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins. My own books, particularly *American Religious Democracy* (2007) and *Hallowed Secularism*, (2009), which no one can afford to buy, were written in opposition to certain aspects of the New Atheism, though acknowledging the reality that many people were leaving the religious traditions—including the author.

Kitcher was the best of this group because of his compassion for people, especially in *Living with Darwin: Evolution, Design, and the Future of Faith* in 2007. He knew that religion offered something that people needed and he thought that trumpeting atheism without regard to that was almost cruel.

Kitcher's recent book, *Life After Faith: The Case for Secular Humanism*, appears to continue in that vein. I haven't read it yet so I'm not going to discuss it. I want instead to inquire after its starting point.

Why would anyone want to argue "the case for" an alternative to religion? In much the same way that almost all people born into a religion end up becoming members of that religion without actually evaluating the other religions, people don't "choose" to cease believing and become secular. Once that happens, people might "choose" to leave or stay in a religious tradition physically, but once the supernatural becomes unreal, that is the end of a certain kind of faith. At least that is what happened to me. (I know that there is a tradition of radical doubt within the religious traditions, which leads to crisis, but that is another matter. In a culture in which the supernatural is in question, doubt need not be experienced as crisis.)

So, why seem to argue against religion and for secular humanism? In his review of Kitcher's book in the New York Review, Adam Kirsch points out that "secular humanists have the duty to be evangelists." That is how Kitcher and the others feel--evangelists against religion--and it is the wrong starting point. Since Kitcher has always said that faith is great for those who have it--something Christopher Hitchens could never admit--and since faith is not an option for those who don't, why argue at all? In other words, why should the nonaffiliated write about religion, other than as a resource for secular life?

Therefore, the subheading of Kitcher's book should have been "Life in Secular Humanism." Kitcher knows this—in fact, the blurb on Amazon reads, "Although there is no shortage of recent books arguing against religion, few offer a positive alternative—how anyone might live a fulfilling life without the support of religious beliefs."—so why does Philip still speak of argument? Why does he devote a chapter to vindicating doubt about religion and another to refined religion that does not espouse supernatural belief?

The answer is that Hallowed Secularism—or secular humanism—is hard. Criticizing religion is easy.

Philip Kitcher does not accept the responsibility of this hour. How do we now live, now that God is dead? It is a simple question. But the question haunted Nietzsche. I doubt that the answer to that question is any kind of humanism. Humans are not in control of reality.

It may be that among the nonaffiliated, the differences may finally have to be confronted, which the preoccupation with religion still prevents. For me, the category of the transcendent is the starting point. Phillip points out that the transcendent cannot function the way traditional religion does. Fair enough. But is the transcendent real? Does it teach humans something lasting about reality? If it is real, then it, not reason, is our proper starting point.

The holy does not disappear when one stops going to church, synagogue, mosque or temple. It just becomes harder to live by it.