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July 22, 2015: Why a Jew Invented Hallowed Secularism

Bruce Ledewitz

Duquesne University, ledewitz@duq.edu

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7/22/2015—If you look on page 7 of the book *Hallowed Secularism* you will see the reference to E.L. Doctorow's 2000 novel, *City of God*. Doctorow invented the term hallowed secularism in that novel. Doctorow died yesterday and I thought it appropriate to think about him and the kind of religion that could bring forth such an idea. In the novel, a very liberal rabbi, Sarah Blumenthal, is struggling with the Jewish tradition. Her synagogue is called the "Synagogue of Evolutionary Judaism." Sarah wants to maintain a universal ethics "in its numinousness". That term refers to the sense humans have of the tremendous mystery of existence. Something more. Sarah wants to answer, yes. God can be seen as something evolving. The teleology of humanity, which we pursue without even always realizing it, has given "one substantive indication of itself—that we, as human beings, live in moral consequence." Realizing this is the potential of hallowed secularism. I used to think of this as mere humanism, but it is not that. Instead, there is a reality apart from just us, though we are a part of that reality. We relate to that reality. Doctorow was born in 1931. A baby through the Depression. Ten at WWII. Drafted during the 1950's. His first novel was published in 1960. So Doctorow was Jewish to his core, but was part of the last Jewish American generation that could think religion without primarily thinking the holocaust. He was as liberal as could be. But he was always a religious thinker. Politically, there was something European about him. According to the NY Times obit, he described himself as part of the "pragmatic social democratic left." (This might be how my hero, the late Tony Judt, might have described himself). Doctorow must have viewed Judaism as closer to the universal element that is real and universal, without the fantastic elements he could not believe. This was leading him toward something wholly secular, but not simplistically materialistic. We need the holy, he was reminding us.