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November 22, 2015: Reason is Not an Alternative to Religion

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Title: Reason is Not an Alternative to Religion

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11/22/2015—S.T. Joshi is an Indian American literary critic and novelist and is the editor of the book, *Atheism: A Reader*, which I have not read (though undoubtedly I have read pieces of it).

Joshi was upset by a David Brooks comment that the “secular substitutes for religion—nationalism, racism and political ideology—have all lead to disaster.” So Joshi wrote a short letter to the editor in the NY Times on Friday in which he stated that he was “deeply offended” by Brooks’ characterization.

“The true secular substitute for religion is reason,” he wrote.

Now let’s think about this. The statement implies that religious believers don’t utilize reason, which is a common secular statement, but, as I’m sure Joshi realizes, would be just as offensive to many religious believers as Brooks’ statement was to him. Take a look, for example, at the kind of Christian thinking that criticizes paradoxical religion at [Bible Gateway](#).

The influence of various movements within our culture such as New Age, Eastern religion, and irrational philosophy have led to a crisis of understanding. A new form of mysticism has arisen that exalts the absurd as a hallmark of religious truth. We think of the Zen-Buddhist maxim that "God is one hand clapping" as an illustration of this pattern.

To say that God is one hand clapping sounds profound. It puzzles the conscious mind because it strikes against normal patterns of thought. It sounds "deep" and intriguing until we analyze it carefully and discover that at root it is simply a nonsense statement.

This religious thinking is steeped in reason. Yes, God is mysterious, but lots of matters in the universe are mysterious. For example, Joshi does not understand quantum entanglement (no one does), but that doesn’t mean it isn’t real.

What Joshi means by reason is probably evidence-based policy making. But that matter is a small subset of what is at stake in religion. Most religious people have no problem at all with evidence based policy making. They do not object to geology class teaching the age of the Earth. Evolution is controversial because of its ethical implications or meaning implications. No one wants high school biology class to teach that the universe is without meaning. That is not, nor could it be, an evidence based statement. It is a different kind of statement.

Joshi is wrong not because reason is unimportant or unreliable—it might be both. Joshi is wrong because reason is, for him, a means-end connection. For Joshi, reason does not define proper human ends or goals. But that is precisely what religion does. Religion defines proper human activity.

So, I ask what secularism substitutes for religion in defining proper human activity? It is crystal clear that decent secularists substitute a kind of political liberalism or economics based conservative ideology. We used to substitute Marxism. Indecent secularists substitute racism and nationalism, just as Brooks says.

I have to add here that this flimsy, thin thinking is not all that secularism might embrace. Hallowed Secularism attempts to find deeper roots for secularism. One such root might be the thinking of Martin Heidegger, who may be thought of as teaching how one can be religious without the fantastic elements that put Joshi off. Reason might be given a new name—philosophy. And that endeavor might be searching for what is whole, deep and rich in reality.