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### June 15, 2018: What is Wrong?

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Title: What is Wrong?

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6/15/2018—I am working a book review essay for the Tulsa Law Review concerning three books that ask the question, in one way or another, what is wrong?

People are still shocked that Donald Trump could be President—including some of the people who voted for him. How could this wreck of a human being have ascended so high in our society?

But it is deeper than that. Everybody believes that her opponents have succumbed to new lows in public life. I ask, how could Republicans not see that President Trump went to Korea, gave away the store and came back with nothing? If Obama had done it, they would be screaming for his scalp.

But Republicans say, if Obama had done this, Democrats would be applauding. How could they be so hypocritical? And maybe they're right.

So, let's say a lot of us are angry and in despair. Why is that?

Along comes Michael Ignatieff in the New York Review of Books, reviewing three books on the relationship between liberal, secular politics—think the separation of church and state—and religion. Ignatieff believes that religion will not go away, despite liberal anticipation of secularization. And he thinks he knows why. He writes:

*Finally, a cardinal fact about liberal society is that it disappoints. It offers no radiant tomorrows, no redemption, no salvation. The most that the social democratic variants of liberalism have promised is a welfare state that seeks the slow reduction of unmerited suffering, the gradual diminution of injustice, and the increase of prosperity and individual flourishing. These public goals are what Western liberalism at its best has had to offer since Franklin Roosevelt, but they leave many people yearning for deeper collective belonging and stronger ties to tradition and community. This dissatisfaction leaves a void, which is constantly being filled by nonliberal doctrines.*

Notice two things. First, Ignatieff has completely given up the effort to combine liberal values with flourishing human life. Liberal values, here secular values, just must be flat and dissatisfying. That is what immanence entails.

But, second, notice that he believes religion can counter this. Here Ignatieff is just wrong. If your society embraces a flat secular universe, it will infect religious life also. Tell me, just where in America does religion deliver “radiant tomorrows?” Not in any mosque, church or synagogue I have recently visited.

What Ignatieff does not see is that this is not necessary. He is the biographer of Isaiah Berlin and he believes that the whole point of liberalism is to narrow the reach of public life. There are no universal values. There are no great ends. The fear of Stalinism has now led to a new disaster of public life—empty and purposeless human life. Ignatieff is the human face of nihilism.

This is not necessary or inevitable. Ignatieff himself is trying to pick up the pieces in a new book entitled *Ordinary Virtues*. In it, he says that there are no universal values, but there are “tolerance, forgiveness, trust, and resilience.”

Not bad, but not enough. With that starting point, though, one could begin to construct a beautiful secularism. But not if beauty itself is by definition out of reach.