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December 23, 2018: More of the New Mark Lilla

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Title: More of the New Mark Lilla

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12/23/2018—Can a person change his mind without ever acknowledging his prior error? Of course the answer is yes. This is what enables Mark Lilla to keep telling everyone what to do without any humility. Actually, he is the person he keeps criticizing. Lilla was my bete noire in the original *Hallowed Secularism* book. Lilla had just published *The Stillborn God* and was writing New Atheist essays about how politics has to be thin, has to be about not harming each other. He argued that this keeps us from killing each other over issues of ultimate salvation. There are no universal truths of politics or morality. We Westerners are always in danger of returning religion to public life. Everything Lilla stood for then has been proven wrong, or at least insufficient. As Michael Ignatieff has pointed out—see August 4, 2018 below—this kind of politics inevitably disappoints. It is not satisfying to people. We need a more robust commitment to truth. Of course, this is obvious now that Donald Trump with his war on truth is President. However, rather than acknowledging his mistake and learning from it, Lilla turned around ten years later and attacked identity politics in *The Once and Future Liberal*—as if identity politics was not inevitable if there were no universal truths. Lilla is still confused about truth, but he criticized identity politics as too thin for modern life. Lilla wrote in that book that we need the universal solidarity that his own group, the New Atheists, helped undermine. Weird. But now, in an essay in the *New York Review*, Lilla goes one more step in repudiating his former self without acknowledgment. He argues that because the French Left has never had much feel for Catholicism, it “is often caught unawares when a line has been crossed.” That description fits Lilla and the secular America Left like a glove. Not being aware that a line was crossed—take the loss of tax exempt status for not recognizing same-sex marriage as an example—is the major reason Donald Trump was elected. The point is that Lilla now recognizes the power and importance of religion, at least culturally and politically, and that he did not before. So, when does he fess up? It would be helpful if he would, because Lilla’s confession of error might influence other secular leftists to stop going after religion.