

SECOND THOUGHTS OF A SECULARIST

*Review of Why America Needs Religion: Secular Modernity and its Discontents by
Guenter Lewy*

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In its scant 160 pages, this book has everything: Riveting argument and thrilling mystery sandwiched between an incoherency and a paradox. Apparently nothing in its writing went according to plan. When he began his project the author was a proud secular humanist, a card-carrying moral relativist, and a subscriber to that view of Reason which holds faith to be unreasonable. His design was to ridicule the writers who ridiculed his creeds, and demolish their proposition that the real crisis of our age is a crisis of unbelief. Somewhere along the way he discovered that they were right after all. Partly right, anyway.

Though Professor Lewy still believes that there is no God, he now finds that he has more in common with religious than with secular thinkers. In particular, he no longer denies the existence of moral truths ("some" moral truths, he says), and he finds it necessary to speak not only of sin but even of redemption (though what meaning these concepts retain for him remains unclear). Moreover he declares that moral reasoning can only "inform" a conscience, not "create" one; for most people, its creation requires faith in God. Lewy envies his believing friends their moral resources. Lacking the model of the love of God, he says, many people in his own ranks love "humanity," but far fewer love "individual human beings with all their failings and shortcomings." They may do good works, but they are "not likely to produce a Dorothy Day or a Mother Theresa."

The author's argument, then, is simply that in order to sustain a decent moral order, America needs religion -- traditional religion, which in our case means Christianity. Virtually the whole of Lewy's case is compressed into just two chapters: The third, on whether secular modernity has promoted the decline of the family and the rise of the underclass, and the fifth, on whether devout Christians are different from other people in terms of crime, prejudice, marital stability, and illegitimacy. Not that two chapters are too few; Lewy does a good job marshalling his evidence and anticipating his critics, and one hopes that 52 pages are still adequate to document the obvious.

More striking, perhaps, is what the author does in the rest of the book. So many

matters must be dealt with just to clear the ground. For instance, he wants to talk about "current realities," but because many people are more interested in drawing up a moral balance sheet on Christian history, he devotes a whole chapter to arguing that this sort of project is futile. He wants to talk about secular humanism, but because many people consider it the figment of a demonizing Christian imagination, he devotes another chapter to putting it in perspective and discussing the various ways in which it does or does not influence our culture and institutions. And he wants to commend religion, but because many people still hold to the deterministic fiction that a secular society is the inevitable wave of the future, he devotes still another chapter to bringing them up to date. The book would be well worth reading if for no other reason than the elegance of its architecture.

Besides an argument I mentioned an incoherency, a paradox, and a mystery. The incoherency lies in the author's previous doctrine. Now conversion is always interesting, and partial conversion no less interesting than complete. What is particularly arresting about *this* partial conversion is that it was not by recognizing his incoherency that the author escaped from it. In the beginning, explains Lewy, he was a noncognitivist. Noncognitivism is the view of ethics which denies that moral statements have truth values, so that "I ought to love my neighbor" is neither a true nor a false utterance, just an utterance. In those days Lewy also approved of the emphasis of some philosophers on the language of morals, because it seemed "the way to move forward toward a sounder and more rational morality." But there is the incoherency, for plainly, if moral statements are neither true nor false, then no morality is sounder or more rational than any other. It seems that the part of Lewy that denied the rationality of moral judgment was at war with the part of Lewy that insisted upon it. Even though Lewy himself never noticed the war, somehow, in the course of his study of culture, the moral side won.

If the incoherency lies in the author's previous doctrine, the paradox lies in his present one. Lewy, who now calls himself a non-theistic rather than a secular humanist, proposes cooperation between Christians and non-theistic humanists against the common secular foe. Not once, but twice, he quotes from the document *Evangelicals and Catholics Together*: "To propose that securing civil virtue is the purpose of religion is blasphemous. To deny that securing civil virtue is a benefit of religion is blindness." "Morality," he says, "needs all the help it can get." Well, that's right, and all real help is welcome. One does not wish to be churlish. But perhaps one may be forgiven a gentle curiosity as to who is helping whom.

Even on Lewy's account, there is a cavity at the heart of non-theistic humanism that only revealed religion can provide. While he insists that a few individuals manage to be good without belief in God, he just as insistently denies that a whole culture can do so. The reason turns out to be that even these few are living on borrowed scruples. Although non-believers can *recognize* such truths as the sanctity of life (so that in that sense these truths are self-evident), they are unlikely to *discover* them (so that in that sense they are not self-evident at all).

In all its types, then, humanism would seem to depend for its very life on religious traditions that it does not and cannot supply. Secular humanism is the parasitic variant that harms its religious host; non-theistic humanism is at best the commensalistic variant that tries to do no harm. Now none of this proves that the Christian revelation is true, and if I were to have the privilege of a leisurely lunch with Professor Lewy I would hope to ask how it is that what he calls myth can find admitted moral truths that what he calls enlightenment cannot. That, it seems, is the mystery.

I highly recommend the author's delightful book. But the one I am really waiting for is his next.