

A Plausible God: Secular Reflections on Liberal Jewish Theology, by Mitchell Silver. New York: Fordham University Press, 2006. 200 pp. \$22.00.

Mitchell Silver (no relation) introduces his book with two personal facts. As a child he had concluded that belief in God was a sign of intellectual immaturity; and, as an adult he has affiliated primarily with Jewish institutions that explicitly bill themselves as “secular.”

The impetus for his writing the book was his recognition that many of his family, friends, and associates had found a place for God in their lives. He quickly realized that they did not believe in the epistemically unacceptable “old God” of his childhood but rather embraced a “new God” which is supposedly compatible with a naturalistic worldview.

Silver identifies several Jewish versions of the “new God” in the work of Mordecai Kaplan, Arthur Green, and Michael Lerner. One sees God as the organic totality of everything that exists. Another sees God as constituted by those things in the natural world which ground a potential for goodness. Silver asks whether a modern, rational person should be a new God-theist or an atheist. Although he refuses to join those faithful to the new God he is “content that others are” (p. xviii).

Silver’s pluralism is premised on two things. As someone who values human freedom he recognizes the “value of others freely choosing other religious “Truths”” (p. 119). He also recognizes that belief in the new God can be on an epistemological par with atheism (p. 107).

They are also on an ethical par. Silver considers and rejects the claim that belief in a new God is superior to atheism. The charge is that because of atheism’s natural connection with humanism it is disposed to falsely see human beings as the sole source of value and meaning (p. 94). Silver also rejects ethical considerations to prefer atheism over belief in the new God. This includes the Marxist charge that belief in God is alienating, and the Nietzschean charge that belief in God is rooted in an unhealthy slave psychology. Silver counters that belief in the new God can be strongly connected to a non-alienating sense of human freedom and that it can foster a “Whitmanesque celebration of self and life” (p. 106). Without epistemological or ethical considerations to serve as a guide, Silver argues that the choice between atheism and belief in a new God is one of religious taste (p. 107).

Among other things, Silver characterizes the believers in the new God as having a taste for the unknown and a taste for extreme emotions (p. 111). New-God adherents also have an aesthetically pleasing “homecoming story” to tell in which the possibility of connecting with the “all” or some ideal of human potential is guaranteed. The atheist can tell a very similar homecoming

story which guarantees the possibility of connecting to a “flourishing, supportive, all-inclusive human community.” Finally, Silver claims that atheism has a major aesthetic advantage since it is not committed to focusing on positive things such as the capacity for growth in human empathy—it can equally tell tales focusing on the extent of human callousness (p. 117).

Silver’s book is clear and interesting. It is certainly worth reading for anyone interested in the place of God in a modern, naturalistic worldview. It is also worth wrestling with the views he puts forward, and, in my case, differing from them. First, though, here are some basic points of agreement: I am sympathetic to Silver’s rejection of the “old God” as epistemically untenable for modern, rational people, and I share his refusal to embrace the “new God.”

I deny, however, that “naturalism is the ticket of admission to serious consideration in the modern world” (p. 26), where naturalism is understood as the view that “the phenomenal, natural world revealed by experience and investigated by science . . . is the only world we have reason to believe exists” (p. 94). I reject naturalism in this sense for two reasons. One is that it does not leave metaphysical room for ethical values, which are not discovered through science. Additionally, science does not even purport to explain the existence of the natural world. A complete respect for science is thus compatible with recognizing the possibility of a supernatural order which explains the existence of the natural one.

This is the view of Maimonides, who holds that God is the fundamentally unknowable source of all that exists. Such a view does not deny the workings of the natural world, or make epistemically unjustified statements about what exists outside the natural realm. Silver can accommodate this point by recognizing that the new-God theorists share a taste for an intimate God that is close at hand. Maimonides shows that there is another epistemically acceptable religious taste for a distant and awesome God.

That said, I do not accept Maimonides’ understanding of God, and for the same reason I reject the “new God.” Both see religion as primarily about a relationship with a thing—whether it is located in the supernatural or the natural order. My approach to religious life is centered on values and I embrace God-talk as rich with ethical and aesthetic possibilities. While Silver and I both reject God-as-thing, our religious views differ since he is a self-avowed secularist and I identify as a religious Jew. Part of the difference is terminological; he identifies the secularist as someone who embraces both naturalism and atheism, whereas I see the secularist as someone outside the grip of a religious tradition.

As Silver notes, part of the Talmud reproves metaphysical speculation (p. 114). According to this strand of the tradition Judaism is primarily con-

cerned about how we should live our lives. This includes a concern both for teaching universal moral duties and for providing a blueprint for a particular human community that recognizes the value of human freedom and accepts the facts of the natural order. By drawing on this strand within the tradition I can remain within the Jewish religious framework without epistemic or moral error. Silver may likewise embrace these values within Jewish institutions that explicitly label themselves as “secular.” The difference between our views may then come to this: Silver opts to affiliate with Jewish institutions that are explicitly atheistic whereas I opt for Jewish institutions that take no particular stance on this metaphysical issue. I thus embrace the opportunity to engage in religious life with those who share our values but have a different understanding of the metaphysical order of things.

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