

Review of A Plausible God: Secular Reflections on Liberal Jewish Theology by Mitchell Silver

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By Joel Marks

The story goes that while being processed for imprisonment, Bertrand Russell was filling out a form that asked what his religion was. He wrote “atheist” (or perhaps “agnostic”), whereupon the jailer remarked, “Isn’t it wonderful? We may belong to different religions, but we all believe in the same one God.” This gave the philosopher a chuckle, but there may be more truth to it than he supposed. More recently, theologian Karen Armstrong has argued in her book *A History of God* (1993) that atheism is always a response to a particular notion of God. Since what is meant by God differs from era to era, not to mention from culture to culture, denomination to denomination, etc, atheism turns out to be an historically-conditioned concept. This means that today’s atheism could be tomorrow’s theism.

Along comes philosopher Mitchell Silver’s new book *A Plausible God*, which tackles the question of whether modern atheism is compatible with ‘the new God’ of some contemporary theologians. The book focuses on the work of liberal Jewish thinkers, an accident of the author’s own interests and commitments, but the arguments and conclusions are meant to be general. Still, Silver is upfront – literally, in his opening chapter – about the problematic nature of his audience, for, Jewish specificity aside, the book speaks to people who are already convinced atheists or else ‘new theists’ – in a word, ‘moderns’. Moderns are those who, like Silver, fancy themselves children of the Eighteenth-Century European Enlightenment: that is, devotees of rationality, science, and liberal or progressive politics. Silver’s sanguine hope is that this includes an increasing number of us, and his publisher, buttressed by (atheist) Daniel Dennett’s enthusiastic endorsement, apparently agrees.

Until recently moderns would have been at best skeptical about matters religious, but Silver notes the novel trend where some moderns hanker after tradition. Silver felt this tug himself in his previous book, *Respecting The Wicked Child: A Philosophy of Secular Jewish Identity and Education* (1998), wherein his response was to champion a sense of Jewish ethnic identity tailored to Enlightenment values and hence shorn of supernaturalism, ie God. He admitted candidly that what had prompted his concern about community was bringing children into the world. Now, a decade later, Silver again reveals a personal motivation for his philosophical investigations, this time his genuine puzzlement about the alternative route chosen by some of his peers, who also seek to enjoy the best of both worlds, modern and traditional, but now with a God compatible with the findings of scientific rationalism. *A Plausible God* is Silver’s effort to discover whether this makes any more sense than the jailer’s happy reverie to Russell.

The inquiry is not just an intellectual exercise, for presumably what motivates new God faith, like any faith, is some kind of felt need. Silver himself may have no such need, perhaps because

he has the Zen-like or existentialist capacity to bite the bullet of raw, difficult, occasionally pleasurable, finite, ultimately pointless human existence – or simply because, as he himself offers, he is of a moderate temperament that has “less of a thirst for heavenly joy and feel[s] less threatened by psychological hell” (p.111) – and because he has never been in a foxhole. But the *rest* of us moderns might be missing something essential to our thriving if we truly turned our backs on all that ‘the God of our fathers’ provided. Much of Silver’s book is a survey of what that provision might have been, and then it considers in detail whether the new God is a satisfactory substitute (for as always, God is in the details).

The reader must keep in mind that Silver is not discussing whether God exists. It is a premise of the book that the old God does not. Lest anyone need reminding of why such a belief is untenable, Silver helpfully provides an appendix that reviews the main arguments for that God’s existence and their refutations. As for belief in the new God, Silver grants that it is on equal epistemic footing with atheism, but that is only because its empirical claims are coincident with the claims of science. Does this leave enough wiggle room for a new God who can ‘satisfy’ the way the old God could? More precisely, can the *belief* in such a God provide the sorts of solace, meaning and inspiration that a *belief* in the old God did? For any benefits accorded by the *actual existence* of the old God have been ruled out of court *ex hypothesi*: and any benefits accruing from the actual existence of the new God would presumably also be available to the scientific atheist – except for those benefits that depended specifically on believing in this God.

The first thing Silver must do is describe this new God for us, but that is a tricky task. As a scholarly text, the book must be faithful to the theologians’ conceptions it seeks to assess. Since it is a given that no two theologians (or scholars) are ever likely to agree perfectly, Silver must abstract some essence that, ideally, will be acceptable to all of them. In fact Silver makes the much broader claim on behalf of the new God that it shares its essence with some very old gods indeed, including the Brahman of Hinduism and even the God of many Christian theologians, both heretical and mainstream. Another challenge is that the new God must avoid both the Scylla of violating Enlightenment sensibilities and the Charybdis of being so vapid as not to be worth the bother of believing in. The danger is that the conception Silver settles upon might be a straw God; but he certainly makes a good-faith attempt to meet all the criteria. The “baseline new God,” Silver concludes, is “whatever there is in nature that makes good things possible” (p.42).

In the end, I think, the reader must decide for him/herself whether the set of qualities Silver identifies as crucial to divinity are what would be minimally desired in a God. Then the issue becomes whether *that* God is compatible with the modernist reader’s beliefs and values. Silver is frankly skeptical that the new theologians have pulled this off. His central suspicion is that they trade on equivocation; that is, when articulating the qualities of their God they explicitly toe the modernist line, but the very act of calling this object of concern ‘God’ implicitly invokes the *old* God, with all of His comforting associations. Silver himself, it seems clear, would rather be a “dissatisfied infidel” than a “satisfied believer” (p.100, resonating of John Stuart Mill).

The Big Lie – adoption of a false belief in the old God because of its superior benefits – is not an option. More to the point, neither is the small self-deception of a “useful obfuscation” (p.101), which is what Silver sometimes suspects the new God to be. To be “clear and honest” (p.101) is Silver’s *modus operandi*. Indeed, the reader will delight in the incisiveness and wit of his

arguments, no matter whether persuaded of Silver's thesis or not. But there may also be the lingering worry of whether the subject matter has been made to fit a Procrustean methodology. Is there no Middle Way between rigid dogmatism and uncompromising skepticism? Silver also acknowledges that his "innocence of [mystical states] surely contributes to a secularist bias," since "mystics seem inclined to theism" (p.xv).

Silver does make one major effort to accommodate his theist co-moderns by suggesting that in the end it is all a matter of taste. In fact he becomes a regular Feyerabend of religion, extolling the prospect of a diversity of beliefs – "a vision of free men and women" (p.120). Here Silver explicitly appropriates the unintended import of Russell's joke: "Religious Truth, *of which I take atheism to be a species*, is plural" (p.115, my emphasis). In doing so Silver also comes full circle to his Jewish roots, for, as I once heard a rabbi declare, a Jew who does not believe in God is still a Jew, since 'Israel' means 'one who contends with God', and that is surely what an atheist does, "or something like it" (p.120).

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