

## The New God

### Mitchell Silver Takes Apart Contemporary Jewish Theology by Larry Bush

THERE'S BEEN A BOOMLET of books about atheism emerging from the publishing world these days, sufficient to warrant "trend-spotting" articles in the *New York Times* and elsewhere. Sam Harris' *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation* are the best-sellers of the bunch; Richard Dawkins' *The God Illusion* is the newest and most hard-core in its antipathy for religion.

I'll be making my own contribution to the trend later this year with *Waiting for God: The Spiritual Explorations of an Atheist* (Ben Yehuda Press), in which I try to identify the generational experiences that caused so many baby-boomers of the 1960s and '70s to turn towards religion and spirituality as expressions of their 'countercultural' identity. How did the Bomb, psychedelic drugs, the modern environmental crisis, and other factors influence their thinking about metaphysics and consciousness? What does "spirituality" actually mean to them?

Before I get my turn to rage before the empty throne of God, however, Mitchell Silver is getting his opportunity with his excellent new book, *A Plausible God* (2006, Fordham University Press, 178 pages), which similarly focuses on progressive baby-boomer theology. "[F]or many years now," Silver introduces his subject, "God has found a place in the lives of family, friends, and associates who claim to be, and appear to be, every bit as rational and modern as I am." Yet "the God that I had been dismissive of since my youth was *not* the God that so many of my fellow 'moderns' were now embracing. . . . What was going on here?"

Silver teaches philosophy at the University of Massachusetts. He is a member of WC/AR's National Execu-

tive Board, directs the WC/AR *shule* in Boston, serves as Camp Kinderland's cultural director, and writes periodically for JEWISH CURRENTS. In *A Plausible God*, he takes a philosopher's scalpel to the theologies of Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionism; Arthur Green, a leading scholar of Jewish mysticism (author of *Seek My Face, Speak My Name*); and Michael Lerner, editor of *Tikkun* magazine. These three share an essential definition of what Silver calls the "new God": a naturalistic, depersonified deity that comprises "whatever there is in nature that makes good things possible. . . . That is all that this baseline God asks one to believe: that goodness is not ruled out. . . . It is an easy God to believe in," Silver observes. But is it a God "worth believing in"?

*Silver first devotes two chapters to unpacking the theology he is analyzing.* The "new God" is variously identified, he writes, as "the organic totality of being"; as "sheer potency, as energy that animates our angelic urges"; as "the movement of individual self-consciousness toward universal self-consciousness"; as "the principles embedded in the universe that make . . . transformation possible"; as "this great overcoming." Notwithstanding his skepticism, Silver's paraphrases and summations are fair, detailed, and thoughtful, and his writing is shapely enough to give readers a real taste of his theologians' emotive power. Still, he grants them no quarter, pairing their every theological assertion with its logical contradictions in a very tidy process of analysis.

"God-talk," he concedes, "may be the only language adequate for the [full] expression of certain emotions" (gratitude, togetherness, hope, etc.). Theologians such

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as Kaplan, Green and Lerner therefore "frequently defend their use of the word 'God' not as representative of a belief, but as expres-

sive of attitudes and as a shaper of attitudes." Scraped clean of superstition, their theology becomes a material force for the good because "the expression of our thoughts and feelings may give them effects . . . effects that unexpressed they may lack." Silver sees "a sort of idealism" at work in this, with "the idea of divinity giv[ing] birth to the reality of divinity" by helping to mobilize people's better selves and better deeds. But "as is the case with many idealisms," he writes, "it feels that we have pulled a rabbit from a

hat” — and just as he is “disinclined to go into the rabbit-breeding business by buying a case of top hats,” he is “disinclined to make gods out of a universe that is initially empty of divinity.”

*In my last installment of this column (July-August, 2006),* I suggested that “new God” theologies like Mordecai Kaplan’s may foster a ‘slippery slope’ effect by permitting us to lower our skeptical defenses while awakening the “magical thinking” aspects of our mental architecture. Silver argues convincingly, along similar lines, that the “new God” is fundamentally a portal to the “old God.” How else to explain the act of praying to a supposedly depersonified, naturalistic, non-responsive “baseline” God? The “comforting power of this powerless God,” Silver suggests, may be attributable to “ambiguity. When asked to articulate a theology, ‘God’ names the theologians’ natural, eminently credible God,” but, the God they are proposing as “an object of daily faith,” of ritual and prayer, is, in fact, “the old lord of hosts, or at least something a lot nearer to him than the theologians’ for-the-record God.” In short, Silver believes that modern believers are using the “new God” to sidestep their own skepticism about the “old God” — the God who is a creator, an agent, a caring, comprehending being, and so on — so that they can engage in the petitionary prayer, text study, consolatory rituals and other kinds of experiences that are, in fact, the province of the “old God.”

*Throughout his study, Mitchell Silver gives atheism a good name* because he does not use the old God-with-a-white-beard as his straw man. He cannot be dismissed as tone-deaf or dour (he is the most wisecracking philosopher you’ll ever read). He recognizes the “new God” as more a therapeutic device than an explanatory dogma, “more a Whitmanesque celebration of self and life than a Pauline denial of this world” — and he appreciates the power of the theologies he’s analyzing to arouse our higher nature.

Silver also avoids the glib association of Marxist materialism with atheism. “If we were really free in Marxist terms,” he writes, “we would not believe in the old God, but we might, as a creative choice, care to conceive of ourselves and nature in any of various guises that acknowledge the reality of human power” — among which Silver places new-God theology. He notes in this discussion that the “new God” is most commonly embraced by “the (relatively) unalienated . . .

[who] control the conditions of their labor far more than have most traditional working classes” — i.e., middle-class professionals, for whom a theology of celebration rather than salvation seems most attractive.

While Mitchell Silver clearly shares my aesthetic and intellectual preference for atheism (“the new God,” he writes, “does not do anything that atheism does not do as well”), he finds comfort in the thought that atheists and those who believe in the new God can share “not only a common moral program, but also a common social vision . . . of free men and women finding what meanings they will in the common life that makes their freedom possible.” His is the mature and confident atheism of a man who very fully understands the alternative. ■