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Hallowed Secularism

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6-28-2007

### June 28, 2007:Hallowed Secularism and Our Religious Traditions

Bruce Ledewitz

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Title: Hallowed Secularism and Our Religious Traditions

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6/28/2007--It is revealing that in E.L. Doctorow's novel, *City of God*, the Episcopal Priest converts to Judaism, while the Jewish rabbi looks to hallowed secularism. Why is this? Why do these two move out of their traditions? Conversely, at an earlier point in the novel, another character is looking at Pem's (the Priest's) books—"I put aside a small stack of his guys I have to read: Tillich, Barth, Teilhard, Heschel. That's about right, he said, after glancing at my choices. But as you will see, all these brilliant theologians end up affirming the traditions they were born into. Even the great Kiekegaard. What do you make of that? I mean, when your rigorous search for God just happens to direct back to your christening, your bris..."It is as if Doctorow is telling us not to stay where we began. But the novel really draws the opposite conclusion: that we are always where we began. The Priest remains a Priest; the rabbi, a rabbi. They just look at their traditions from a different angle. Or perhaps I should say that their starting points form the lenses they now use to look at something else. Hallowed Secularism will be formed of people who came from somewhere else. This is because Hallowed Secularism is not itself a religion. It is instead the way for people who cannot fit into their original religious traditions to remain religious, to remain faithful. But they could of course do the opposite. They could remain in their childhood religious homes and practice a very liberal or unusual form of their Judaism or Christianity. Some people received so little religious formation that this is problematic. But others, like me and like Doctorow, could stay and become Heschel Jews or Tillich Protestants. Why not just do that? Maybe the problem is that this is not sufficiently universal for the new age. The story of God must now unfold on a completely world-wide stage. The two religious traditions I know that seem to be on to this need for universality are Buddhism and Catholicism. You may wonder about the Catholic Church in this regard. But then you probably have not read *Truth and Tolerance* by Cardinal Ratzinger before he became Pope.