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Hallowed Secularism

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### July 20, 2007: Secularism's Indifference to Religion as the Task of Hallowed Secularism

Bruce Ledewitz

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Title: Secularism's Indifference to Religion as the Task of Hallowed Secularism

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Upon reading the welcome question in this blog, "Wouldn't you like to live your life abundantly?" my daughter told me that her friends wouldn't read any further. It sounded too religious. Her friends, she said, had no interest at all in religion.

That is my impression as well, in my dealings with young people. Many seem quite indifferent to religion and religious issues. My first task is to awaken interest.

Indifference is something new in secularism. John Dewey would be considered one of the great American secularists. Yet he was very familiar with the teachings of Christianity and quite sympathetic. Breaking with Christianity, to the extent Dewey really did break with Christianity, was difficult for him. Dewey could not possibly be considered indifferent to religion.

I may be wrong, of course, about this trend among young people. My impression may be a function of the young whom I know and where I live and so forth. This book, after all, is not social science and I am not trying to prove things. If this indifference hasn't yet taken root, however, it soon will. I have a hypothesis about why that is.

No one would dispute that young people in America are more secular than their parents and grandparents. According to a March 2007 Pew Research Center report, 19% of those born after 1976, that is roughly 30-years-old and under, describe themselves as "atheist, agnostic, or no religion." This compares with only 5% of those born before 1946 and 11% of those born between 1946 and 1964. In another Pew Research Poll, among those 65 and older, 44% considered the Bible the "literal word of God" versus 29% among those 18-29. Conversely, 13% of those 65 and older, only 13% viewed the Bible as "not [the] word of God", compared to the 24% of those 18-29, who felt that way. Nor is this just a matter of young people being more secular and growing more religious as they grow older. The 2007 Pew report concluded that "the number of seculars within each generational group is about the same in 2007 as it was 10 or 20 years before. Thus it appears that people have not become less secular as they have aged."

Of course, those numbers actually show that America is a very religious society today and is going to continue to be so for a very long time. That is why Presidential candidates in 2008 are emphasizing their belief in God. America is a religious democracy and is going to stay one for the foreseeable future.

My point is not how secular we are at the moment, but rather that secularists are now sufficiently numerous that they can no longer be considered a fringe group. The importance of that change is that for some young people, religion no longer sets a framework of meaning. For someone like Dewey, religion always did that even if the religious message was rejected. There is now, for the first time, a substantial group of secular young people who never learned much at all about what religion is about and do not feel they are lacking anything because of that.

That is the sort of person who hears the term "abundant life" and feels uncomfortable. Religion for such a person is not even a mystery. This shortchanges such people more than they know.