

Duquesne University

Duquesne Scholarship Collection

Ledewitz Papers

The Collective Works of Bruce Ledewitz, Adrian
Van Kaam C.S.Sp. Endowed Chair in Scholarly
Excellence and Professor of Law

6-3-2022

The Future of Secularism

Bruce Ledewitz

Duquesne University, ledewitz@duq.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dsc.duq.edu/ledewitz-papers>



Part of the [Constitutional Law Commons](#), [Law and Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Law and Politics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bruce Ledewitz, The Future of Secularism, *The Marginalia Review*, June 3, 2022

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Collective Works of Bruce Ledewitz, Adrian Van Kaam C.S.Sp. Endowed Chair in Scholarly Excellence and Professor of Law at Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Ledewitz Papers by an authorized administrator of Duquesne Scholarship Collection. For more information, please contact beharyr@duq.edu.



The Future of Secularism

[June 3, 2022](#)

Bruce Ledewitz on liberalism's current crisis

W

hat did it take for liberalism's elite to realize there is a crisis of faith in the values of liberalism—freedom, democracy, tolerance, generosity, openness? A war in Ukraine, the landslide victory of Viktor Orban in Hungary, the strong surge by Marine Le Pen in France, and the continuing big lie that the 2020 American presidential election was stolen, to name only a few.

Instead of freedom, democracy, tolerance, generosity, and openness, what is surging around the world is fear and suspicion that manifest in hostility to all outsiders—immigrants, free trade, global institutions, even the concept of universal human rights—and a dangerous yearning for order and stability. This realization seemed to arrive all at once. On April 10, I read two columns on this very subject in the Sunday edition of *The New York Times*. The headline of David Brooks's column warned that *Globalization Is Over. The Global Culture Wars Have Begun*. And Ross Douthat pointed out that the hope of Ezra Klein and others that the courageous defense of Ukraine would spark a recommitment to liberal values, has not been fulfilled.

This is not a crisis in liberalism alone. That is, it is not a crisis over one set of values versus another. It is a crisis over the validity of any values at all. It is a crisis over the possibility of rational and universal commitments. It is a crisis of truth. That is why, well before the war in Ukraine began, it was said that we live in a "post-truth age." But that recognition just begs the question. Why do we live in a post-truth age? We didn't used to. What happened?

Douthat argued in his column that "since the 1960's, when the old Protestant consensus cracked up", liberalism has been in search of a form of religious grounding. But this search has been unsuccessful. Liberalism's "resolutely secular," "intellectual elite" retain the "illusion" of "a perfected, post-religious liberal order that can establish solidarity and purpose without any of the old American appeals to Providence or nature's God." As I argued in my recent book, *The Universe Is on Our Side*, the crisis in all of its forms, the crisis that brought us the hyper-partisan, hate-filled, fantasy-driven American politics of today, is the Death of God come home to roost. American public life, and public life all through the West, is suffering a crisis of faith because God, the traditional source of all our values, is no longer their effective guarantor. This crisis arose not because people did not go to church as much as they used to, although that is the case.

Today, around a third of American adults report no affiliation with any religious institution. These are the well-known “nones.” Nor did it arise because fewer Americans identify as Christian, although that is also true. Today, around 63% of Americans identify as Christian, down from 75% only ten years ago.

The crisis arose because the Death of God that the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche announced in the person of the madman in *The Gay Science* in 1882 does not just mean the emptying out of churches. More fundamentally, it means the devaluing of traditional values. It means that people no longer have confidence in truth, goodness, beauty and justice to found and sustain Western civilization. People no longer see these values as real. Or no longer understand them.

If you no longer believe, with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., that the arc of the moral universe, though long, bends toward justice, then your attitude toward political life is going to be one of a zero sum game. You have to win now. You cannot rely on your opponents to eventually see the truth of things. And if things do not seem to be going well, despite all your efforts, you can only despair. You cannot take comfort in the likelihood that you will be vindicated by history. Nor are secularists, that is, nonbelievers, the only ones affected by the Death of God. It affects even those who still participate in the religious traditions. It even affects what they can hope for. It was revealing that during the depth of the pandemic, there were no national Americans figures, religious or otherwise, who led prayers asking God to spare America the worst effects of the virus.

Even the Pope hesitated to ask for that kind of divine intervention. In my book, I tell the story of Pope Francis delivering the *Urbi et Orbi* Address on March 27, 2020, asking God to be with us in the pandemic. The Pope referenced the account of the disciples fearing death from the storm in the Gospel of Mark. But the Pope omitted Mark 4:41: “Who is this that even the wind and the sea obey him?” To have included that verse would have invited a prayer for God to spare us from the virus. That kind of prayer would have been second nature 200 years ago. But we have become naturalists. We know viruses are natural events, even if created in a lab, and God has nothing to do with their spread.

T

he Death of God means that, even for those who say they believe in Him, God no longer acts in the affairs of the world. That is a big change.

And there is yet a more sinister effect on religion than just the turn to naturalism. Recently, *The New York Times* reported what many of us have noticed, that religious rituals now regularly appear at conservative political rallies. One evangelist offered this prayer at a recent Trump rally: “‘Father in heaven, we firmly believe that Donald Trump is the current and true president of the United States.’ He prayed ‘in Jesus’ name’ that precinct delegates at the upcoming Michigan Republican Party convention would support Trump-endorsed candidates, whose names he listed to the crowd. ‘In Jesus’ name,’ the crowd cheered back.” As the story described, “right wing political activity is now a holy act.”

This is blasphemy from the perspective of traditional Christian belief. As C.S. Lewis often pointed out, politics is never the same as religion. Only the weakened and divided state of Protestantism in the United States today allows such heresy to go forward without challenge. How could a crisis over the Death of God be resolved? Probably not by returning to traditional religion, at least not in the foreseeable future. I see the problem, and I know I'm not going back to synagogue.

In this same moment of realization, one of those members of liberalism's intellectual elite, Francis Fukuyama, wrote in *Foreign Affairs* of the "spiritual vacuum" at the heart of liberalism. But he did not feel that this could be directly overcome. In modern pluralist societies like the United States, the "idea of restoring a shared moral tradition defined by religious belief is a nonstarter."

So, Fukuyama concluded that the answer to the crisis is a renewed acceptance of nationalism. The subtitle of his article was *Liberalism Needs the Nation*. Well, we have heard that siren call before. Nationalism is certainly not the answer.

If there is to be an answer to the spiritual crisis that is both fueling a mean-spirited populism in the world and undermining confidence in liberal values, we have to first admit that the source of the problem is the breakdown in religious consensus in the West.

This is hard for some secularists to accept. In 2019, when Attorney General William Barr argued for a return to religion on similar grounds, Phil Zuckerman answered that Barr was wrong to think that growing secularism makes people unhappy. In March, 2022, Zuckerman returned to this theme in *OnlySky*, pointing out that according to the latest World Happiness Report, the top ten happiest nations in the world are among the most secular: Finland, Denmark, Iceland, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Sweden, Norway, Israel, and New Zealand. But this result just shows us that small, homogeneous countries have other sources of social solidarity and cohesion. Similarly, Zuckman's earlier point that in the U.S. secular blue states do better than more religious red states shows that wealth is related to good social outcomes. Blue states are wealthier.

Much more relevant are results like those from sociologist Ilana Horwitz, who reported in a *New York Times* column in March that working-class males who grow up in religious traditions are much less likely to drop out of college than are their less religious, or non-religious, peers.

The surge in populism in the world today often tracks precisely working-class voters. That was true for Trump. It is true for Orban. And it is true for Le Pen. These voters are people for whom religion serves important needs.

I

It is time for secularists to stop denying the reality in front of our faces and, again in the words of Douglass, to confront the challenge that the citizens and children of liberalism are unhappy.

But admitting the baleful effects of the Death of God, while necessary, is only a first step. While religious believers can certainly recommit to liberal values, that will not be enough to return the West to healthy public life. To that extent, Fukuyama is right. We are past the point where a religious revival in America would mean a national revival. So, while a religious revival that jettisoned the idolatry of right-wing political worship is greatly to be desired, the future of liberalism does not lie in religion.

The future of liberalism lies in secularism. What is needed for a renaissance in liberalism worldwide is a spiritual revival in secularism itself. To put this another way, the current crisis in values after the Death of God could be thought of as the birth pangs of the creation of the first genuinely secular civilization in human history. It is an open question whether such a civilization is possible. Until recently, non-belief in the West always contrasted itself with belief. Even the New Atheists of the early 21st Century emphasized what they rejected—God and religion—rather than what they accepted. The politics they proffered was thin, always only a matter of not forcing people to believe things or act in a certain way. The New Atheists never spoke of the common good, nor offered a path toward it. So, the daunting task, never before attempted, is to try to build a secular civilization that does more than just deny religion. In my book, I argue that the foundation of that secular civilization can be built on the answers, yes and no, that we give to the question put to us by the Canadian theologian Bernard Lonergan in his 1972 book, *Method in Theology*: “Is the universe on our side?” Lonergan understood that the answer to this question might be no. Many people who reject any God endorse an ontology—that is, a view about what is real in the universe—of strict mechanical materialism. In this view, everything is made up of forces and matter. Movement of all kinds is the result of applying force to matter.

Materialists of this type currently dominate organized American secularism. They attended the Reason Rallies in 2012 and 2016. They lead humanist and atheist groups. They are the ones who exhibit hostility toward religion, and skepticism about anything beyond the ken of the senses. They are also the ones who consider the human need for meaning and purpose to be an ill-advised illusion. There simply is no story of ultimate meaning to tell. We can call this secularism of the no, because people like this answer Lonergan’s question, no, the universe is not on our side. I take the no seriously as a possible foundation for a secular future. I point to Carl Sagan’s magnificent gesture, which many of us know as the pale blue dot episode, as an example of an attempt to build a civilization on the no. Sagan asked NASA to take one last picture of Earth as the *Voyager 1* spacecraft passed Neptune. On Feb. 14, 1990, just 34 minutes before the spacecraft powered off its cameras forever, a picture of Earth was taken, 3.7 billion miles away from the sun. This image of the Earth is what Sagan called the pale blue dot. Sagan said about this image:

our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves.

According to Sagan, being alone in an uncaring universe means that we should take care of each other and the planet.

I

It is true that there is a tragic aspect to human life in the no. Our values are merely human constructions. Nothing we do can be validated. Nevertheless, I argued in the book that, if we honestly ask Lonergan's question and no is our answer, and we live in faithfulness with the no, we can build a civilization far healthier than what we have now. After all, the universe is not hostile, even in the no. We are well adapted to live in this universe.

But since the book was published, I admit that I am having doubts about the capacity of secularism of the no to ground our civilization. Partly, this doubt stems from the unwillingness among secularists of the no to admit that there is a crisis. Many of them refuse to consider that a deeper commitment than just thin politics might be necessary to revive liberalism. They are not interested in supporting a renewed commitment to the common good. In short, it seems difficult for secularism of the no to take the building of secular civilization seriously. Secularists of this sort seem to be stuck in simple black-and-white opposition to religion.

In addition, there is an even deeper problem with secularism of the no. All secularists like to say that "people can be good without God." That is undoubtedly true. But people cannot readily be good without a notion of the good. Even a secularism of the no would have to endorse at least a good for humanity as we know it. There would have to be an admission that there is such a thing as human nature and that a healthy society would have to respect that nature. We have to be able to ask, as the sociologist Nicholas Christakis asked in *Blueprint*, his 2019 book, *what kind of society is good for us?* Doing that seems beyond the capacity of secularism of the no.

Fortunately, there is, just now dawning, another kind of secularism: a secularism of the yes. These are people—I include myself—who though rejecting God and supernaturalism of any kind, answer Lonergan's question, yes—the universe is on our side. It should not come as a shock that there are secularists like this. After all, most of the nones, by some estimates three-quarters of them, report on surveys that they believe in God. Many say they are "spiritual but not religious." The New Atheist writer Chris Hitchens never sounded like that. Admittedly, it is unclear what secularists of the yes mean when they use the word God. There doesn't seem to be any kind of rigorous inquiry into spiritual matters among any secularists.

Nevertheless, secularists who say they believe in God must mean at least that there is more to reality than forces and dead matter. They certainly reject mechanistic materialism. We don't know much else about these secularists of the yes. It is hard to find them because yes secularists are not yet organized as a secular alternative. Efforts to define something like this group in surveys, as in the recent book, *Secular Surge* by David Campbell, Geoffrey Layman, and John Green have not been successful. Probably, the closest the yes secularists come to doing anything together is listening to Krista Tippett's *On Being* radio program on Sunday mornings on NPR. But if they could be interviewed, we might find that they are much less hostile to religion than are the strictly materialistic secularists. That is because, like most religious people, yes secularists believe there is more to the universe than meets the eye. This would not be for them a form of supernaturalism. It could be understood as a richer form of naturalism

W

What would secularists of the yes see in a universe that is on our side?

First, they would not assume that matter is simply dead. That is the disenchantment of Max Weber. They would see instead, in accordance with the process theory of Alfred North Whitehead, a degree of experience and spontaneity in matter. That is not anti-science. Science itself has been stymied in its understanding of many aspects of reality—including consciousness, quantum theory, time, the enduring self—by an overly rigid materialism. Second, they would assume that the human experience of meaning and purpose is a real phenomenon, rather than an illusion. That is, our normative intuitions can be a source of knowledge about the universe. Third, they would see a direction in evolution. Brian Swimme, in *The Universe Story*, put it simply: we are descendants of a fish that, contrary to the practices of other fish, did not eat her young. The primatologist Frans de Waal traces the natural evolution of morality through primate societies.

Our empathy, compassion and love are not accidents, but are built into us through a long history of evolution. The potential for life is built into the self-ordering of matter. Life arises inevitably. Fourth, they would see the universe as rational and its rules as predictable. We can know the universe because we are part of the universe. And, finally, they would look at human history as a whole and see the arc of the moral universe bending toward justice. The overwhelming example of the world-wide abandonment of chattel slavery, once the foundation of economic life in the West, vindicates the view that reason and history do reveal the truth of values.

As Gandhi said, truth and love have always won; the tyrants and murderers always fall—always. In all these ways, secularists of the yes would see a universe like us, which is in part what Lonergan meant by a universe on our side. Granted, the universe is also violent and disordered, as are we. Much of creativity resides exactly there. Death itself can be viewed as a necessary aspect of life, not as something to be overcome. A secularism of the yes would be able to accept human existence on the terms that life offers. But there is far more than disorder. The spirituality that many of the “nones” wish to experience can also be viewed as a real part of life. The feeling that one has left ordinary experience and entered a form of life that is deeper, truer and more enduring than our ordinary lives will be vindicated and not simply dismissed, as the dominant form of secularism does today.

Secularism of the yes can restore American public life. We can be reassured that our deepest longings are real—there is such a thing as standing for truth and justice. As living a good life. As creating beauty. These are not just opinions or illusions. Secularism of the yes can lower the temperature of politics. Our opponents should be seen not as evil but mistaken. That is how Dr. King looked at opponents. We should have confidence that truth has power and therefore our opponents will recognize their errors—or, better, we’ll both see that we have been partly right and partly wrong. Identity and tribalism should melt away in the common relationship of humanity to the universe. And the universities should again become places to experience the connectedness of all things in the greater harmony of the universe.

I have high hopes for secularism of the yes. I hope that we will offer a healthy replacement for the wonder-working God of the Bible and that our connection to the universe will heal the current divisions in American public life. I also hope we will forge an alliance with religious

believers since we have no reason to be hostile to religion. Most important, I hope we will renew America's faith in the objectivity of values that suffered in the Death of God.

The universe vindicates truth, goodness, beauty and justice. You don't have to be a member of any religion to believe that. And if that is the case, then the traditional universal values of liberalism—freedom, democracy, tolerance, generosity, openness—are valid as well. If all of this occurred, secularism of the yes would serve as the foundation of a reinvigorated liberalism. The crisis in liberalism would be over. Aggressive, narrowminded populism would lose its steam. The other, the outsider, would again be welcome. We would have hope in a shared future. And universal humanity would again be the proper subject of public life.

Duquesne Law Professor Bruce Ledewitz is the author of American Religious Democracy, (2007), Hallowed Secularism (2009), Church, State, and the Crisis in American Secularism (2011) and The Universe Is on Our Side: Restoring Faith in American Public Life, as well as the [HallowedSecularism Blog](#). He is a regular contributor to the [Pennsylvania Capital-Star](#). Ledewitz is a graduate of the Georgetown School of Foreign Service and Yale Law School.