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Hallowed Secularism

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1-6-2008

### January 6, 2008: The Need for Religion

Bruce Ledewitz

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Title: The Need for Religion

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1/6/2008--I have been at the Association of American Law Schools convention in New York City the last few days. On Saturday I attended two events that have a bearing on the relationship between religion and progressive political action. At the convention itself, Professor Julie Nice of the University of Denver College of Law argued the need to try to establish some form of a right in the poor for assistance from the larger society. Rights, she said, are the most potent rhetorical source legal power that we have. Professor Nice ended by asking about the potential sources of such a right. Professor Marie Failinger of Hamline University School of Law responded, in a talk of her own, that our faith traditions, specifically the religions of the book—Judaism, Christianity and Islam, provide precisely deep and nuanced conceptions of such a right that are normative for millions of our citizens. This religious source must be utilized by those seeking to aid to poor. And, indeed, living wage movements, for example, usually do contain a self-consciously religious element. I also attended a program entitled Christian Legal Thought, co-sponsored by the Lumen Christi Institute and The Law Professors' Christian Fellowship. Unlike the poverty law program, these groups are comprised in part of politically conservative people. I was struck by the earnest efforts at the meeting to bring Gospel principles to bear on social issues. The discussion of immigration reform, for example, contained none of the demonization of illegal immigrants that has often characterized discussion of this issue. Of course, even putting the matter that way is an insult to the members of these groups. Why should I imagine that they would engage in such bashing? My point is that other conservatives do and these earnest Christians do not. They seek instead both justice and compassion in social policy. Speaking as a progressive on most political issues, I find the hostility to religious participation in public life that some secularists manifest bizarre and self-defeating. As usual, when religion was invoked at the AALS convention, there was usually a tension in my secular friends. And, if religion was being invoked to defend what we call conservative political positions, the usual suspects were hauled out by secularists—this was an offense to pluralism and so forth. I am looking forward to the time when non-believers will see the value of religious belief—not just in the pragmatic sense I am invoking here, but also the real and underlying value. Believers are in touch, or seek to be, with transcendence. That is something secularists will one day seek to share, on secular terms.