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Hallowed Secularism

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2-7-2008

### February 7, 2008: The Secular American Young

Bruce Ledewitz

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Title: The Secular American Young

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2/7/2008--The extent to which the young in America shun organized religion for a secular orientation was brought home in a 2/4/2008 op-ed in USA Today by Professor Stephen Prothero, author of *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't* (2007). Professor Prothero teaches an Introduction to Religion course to undergraduates at Boston University. For the past two years he has asked the students to "create their own religions." The results are, naturally, pretty funny and, in part, intended to be. But what struck Professor Prothero "is how similar they are." These religions do not involve dogma. They are nonjudgmental. They make few demands, either intellectually or morally. They are also secular: "They are allergic to divinity and even heaven." These religions, writes Professor Prothero, are similar to the religion offered by Joshua Boden of the music group Angelic Bombs in an upcoming documentary: This life is the one that counts; this IS your eternal reward. Another student in the story calls this "organized atheism" but I don't think that is the case. These students are the "spiritual but not religious' generation" as Professor Prothero says and others have also suggested. But they are not atheists. Actually they don't know enough to be atheists. Atheism is more than a denial of a God-being outside time and space. Atheism, despite Christopher Hitchens, is more than antipathy to some of the commitments and actions of organized religion. To be an atheist means to have thought through the meaning of life and the shape of history. Materialism and humanism are not all that attractive when you get to know them. Nor are they really reflective of what most of us experience in our lives. We are meaning-hungry beings and the fundamental religious question is whether that thirst for meaning is in some sense real—that is, reflective of the way things are—or is just a thirst for a mirage in a desert.