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February 16, 2008: How Secularists Knocked Down the Wall of Separation Between Church and State

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Title: How Secularists Knocked Down the Wall of Separation Between Church and State

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2/16/2008--I just finished reading University of San Diego Law Professor Steven Smith's Research Paper, "How Secularists Helped Knock Down the Wall of Separation Between Church and State". Professor Smith argues that the Wall was not undermined just by religious conservatives, but more fundamentally by secularists. Separation of church and state depended in its classic formulation on the understanding of Church and State as dealing with two separate realms—this world and the realm of the spirit—or, in Augustinian terms, the City of God and the City of Man. Both realms made demands on human beings, but the demands were different. Thus, the separation was "jurisdictional". In this reading, it was the triumph of a new kind of understanding of the secular—one that denied reality to anything not material—that eliminated religion as a separate realm with demands of its own. The profane became all that mattered. Religion thus became not separate, but just another private grouping, like the Elks, which must be treated as well as any other group. The issue of church and state is no longer separation but justice—how to treat believers in a pluralist state. Smith's article raises a question for this blog: in Hallowed Secularism, what is the proper relation of church and state? Religion cannot be a separate realm, because public morality affects everything the State does. Hallowed Secularism thus shares what might be called the Old Testament view of the world. There is no separate religious jurisdiction. On the other hand, the relationship of humans to transcendence is not just one more interest group. It is a relationship that government should be able to promote and, at the same time, is a source of potential social critique that should be specially protected from government interference. Hallowed Secularism needs a vibrant religious sector from which to borrow its ideas about the good and the true.