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May 21, 2008: For the Establishment of Religion

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Title: For the Establishment of Religion

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5/21/2008--Now that grading exams is finished, I am turning my attention to the third book in my planned trilogy concerning the role of religion in American life. In the first book, *American Religious Democracy*, published last year, I argued that American political life is not secular, had no obligation to be secular, and could not be secular and still be good and healthy politics. Of course, the 2008 campaign turned out to render the book not just largely true but almost a cliché. At the end of that book, I suggested that secularists should take another look at religion.

The second book, *Hallowed Secularism: A Guide for the Non-Believer*, picked up the argument at that point and tried to imagine a genuinely religious secularism. Now that Palgrave Macmillan has decided to publish that book, I hope that secularism will begin to have an internal debate about its relationship to religion. I hope that cheap anti-religious tirades will recede and the fundamental questions about human life and hope will come to dominate secular thinking.

But such a fundamental change cannot happen without a change in that bastion of secularism: American constitutional law. American law freed itself from religion almost from the start. And the secular state always had more support in law than almost anywhere else in American life. So this third book, *For the Establishment of Religion*, argues that the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment should be interpreted to allow government endorsement of religion, just not any particular religion. The following is from the Introduction:

“Proposals like mine, to endorse religion in a general sense, have been made before. The position is sometimes called non-preferentialism. It asserts that the government is permitted to aid religion in general, or to aid all religions, as long as the government does not discriminate among religious groups. As we shall see, then—Justice Rehnquist proposed this sort of understanding of the Establishment Clause in his dissent in *Wallace v. Jaffree*.

One difference in this presentation in this book is that I am arguing this not as a religious believer, but as a secularist. What is at stake in the struggle over religion in American public life is not the future of religion, but the future of secularism, both in America and ultimately in the world. My thesis is that secularism needs to be open to religion if it is to be healthy—if it is to confront and oppose debilitating consumption and technology. I don't see how such openness is possible in a world that seeks to strictly separate church and state.”

For political reasons, the United States Supreme Court is already moving in the direction of allowing more public expression of religion than earlier cases had done. But there has not yet been any explanation by the Justices as to why that should be, beyond a rather false invocation of the history of the founders. My book says that history cannot resolve the question of the proper role of religion. It is something we must resolve on our own, as citizens.

Religion as a general phenomenon is a kind of worldview, with apologies for the use of that word. Religion is a way of encountering reality. And religion as a worldview can be compared to other worldviews, such as materialism and humanism and even nihilism. Public policy cannot be, has never been and should not be, neutral with regard to these possible viewpoints. In particular, school boards should be extremely concerned about what the curriculum communicates about humankind's traditional questions—who are we, why are we here and what can we hope for? It used to be thought that the purpose of education was equip students to think deeply about such questions. I think religion, broadly conceived, brings us closer to true answers to those questions. Yes, I am a secularist. I don't believe in God. But that is a beginning point, not an end point. Secularism needs to acknowledge the contribution religion can make to the consideration of such questions. It is in that sense that I speak of the establishment of religion.