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September 15, 2008: Secular Hostility to Religion

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Title: Secular Hostility to Religion

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9/15/2008--Two recent stories highlight the reflexive opposition by some secularists against any public appearance of religion. One story is the continuing fallout over the recent decision by the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette to distribute New Testaments in its Sunday advertising section based on a contract with a Christian group. The 9/14/2008 letters to the editor included one letter cancelling a subscription to the paper, calling the decision "appalling". I can understand a religious person objecting to this Bible delivery. What does the religious believer do with the holy book of another religion? How can you respectfully get rid of it? Or, who wants a book of idolatry? All of this is presumably why the paper allowed people to opt out of the delivery with a phone call. But why would a secularist care about receiving a New Testament, especially in a tone that suggests that a newspaper should have known better? What is the problem? Specifically, why is receiving a Bible offensive, or at least more offensive than getting an unwanted bottle of shampoo? Why not just throw it away? I think the underlying problem is secular hostility against religion and an insistence that religion should be kept private, maybe even secret, like a vice. We see a similar kind of secular hostility in a story reported in the Pittsburgh Jewish Chronicle on September 11, 2008 about the eruv confrontation in Westhampton Beach on Long Island. A small group of Orthodox Jews asked Village authorities for permission to erect an eruv around all or part of the town. (An eruv is a symbolic suggestion of a fence, usually placed on telephone polls, always more or less invisible to the casual observer, which under Jewish law allows some carrying of objects on Shabbat, specifically allowing the carrying of children to synagogue). Secularists, many of them Jews, have objected to the eruv on two grounds: first that providing such an aid to Orthodox Jews is a violation of the separation of church and state, which is clearly mistaken at least in terms of the caselaw (a number of municipalities, including Pittsburgh provide aid in erecting eruvs), and the fear that once the eruv is erected, many Orthodox Jews will move in and change the tone of Westhampton. This secular response seems mean. But it is all part of the seeming fear that religion is gaining strength. Secularists should relax. They are in fact the inevitable future.