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9-23-2008

September 23, 2008: Excerpt from For the Establishment of Religion

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Ledewitz, B. (2008). September 23, 2008: Excerpt from For the Establishment of Religion. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/ledewitz-hallowedsecularism/190>

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Title: Excerpt from For the Establishment of Religion

Date: 2008-09-23T17:35:00.003-04:00

9/23/2008--The growth of secularism is the final aspect of consideration of "one nation under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance. Religion has been dominant for a long time and continues to exert a strong political influence in American elections. Secularists may be excused therefore if they push back against religion every chance they get.

But this period of religious domination is ending. It is either already necessary to think about the needs of a secular world, or it will soon be so. My purpose in insisting on the use of the word God, and other instances of religious symbols and language, is to keep a certain kind of cultural space open. This is akin to what Judge Ferdinand Fernandez wrote in his partial dissent in the Ninth Circuit in the Elk Grove case. Removing the word God from public expression, "remove[s] a vestige of the awe all of us, including our children, must feel at the immenseness of the universe and our own small place within it, as well as the wonder we must feel at the good fortune of our country."

This is not a concern only for religious people. Susan Neiman has written that the Enlightenment created natural religion, and used the term God, to "express[] the breath of wonder that the age of Enlightenment exhaled."

It may be true that we do not need religion to experience reverence for existence. But if that is true, it is because we have the example of religion. I am afraid that prematurely jettisoning religious language, including the word God, might expose humankind to profound demoralization.

I have seen suggestions of such demoralization. In September 2008, the American physicist Steven Weinberg wrote in The New York Review of Books about "the question of how it will be possible to live without God"[3] He admitted that living without God is not easy. He offered humor and the ordinary pleasures of life. But Weinberg acknowledged that "the worldview of science is rather chilling."

"Not only do we not find any point to life laid out for us in nature, no objective basis for our moral principles, no correspondence between what we think is the moral law and the laws of nature, of the sort imagined by philosophers from Anaximander and Plato to Emerson. We even learn that the emotions that we most treasure, our love for our wives and husbands and children, are made possible by chemical processes in our brains that are what they are as a result of natural selection acting on chance mutations over millions of years. And yet we must not sink into nihilism or stifle our emotions. At our best we live on a knife-edge, between wishful thinking on one hand and, on the other, despair. "

Other scientists do not agree with Weinberg about the implications of the scientific worldview. I am quoting him not because I think he is right about that, but merely to demonstrate the stakes that he acknowledges in living without God. Living without God is no doubt the direction in which we are headed. But we should not rush ahead without careful preparation. We may eventually have adequate substitutes for expressions like "one nation under God." But we do not have them yet. Until we do, we are better off reinterpreting the language we have to offer the deepest and most inclusive reality we can yet express.