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### January 7, 2009: Signs of the Struggle Over Secularism in Borders Bookstore

Bruce Ledewitz

*Duquesne University*, ledewitz@duq.edu

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Title: Signs of the Struggle Over Secularism in Borders Bookstore

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1/7/2009--I was recently browsing in a Borders Bookstore in Pittsburgh, in the religion section. To my surprise, I found a shelf labeled "Atheism" among the shelves of comparative religion, Islam, Judaism, Christianity and so forth. Surely this is a new phenomenon. Ten years ago, would one have found "atheism" separately listed, let alone listed among the religion categories? (Not that I know where else atheism might go—philosophy? Self help? There is a very large section entitled "Metaphysical Studies". But this section is not dedicated to philosophy or religion. Rather, it seems a sort of new age mysticism corner, with ghosts and tarot cards. Is this an indication of creeping American nuttiness?) The atheism shelf is small. And it seems dedicated to the kind of reflexive anti-religious spirit exemplified by Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris. Yet, in the midst of it, there was a book entitled *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality* by the French philosopher Andre Comte-Sponville. The tone of this book is quite different. Here one finds an appreciation of the religious tradition and a willingness to explore common points of reference. This book sounds more than a little like *Hallowed Secularism*. I think bookshelves like these should be called secularism, not atheism. Of course it is true that anyone who does not believe in the existence of a personal God who intervenes or at least can intervene in the universe is literally an atheist (a—not—theos—God). Yet, for the secularist who is open to spiritual reality and to the power of justice in history, the word God can function as a symbol of just such commitments. The word secularism would announce the coming contest between secularists open to the religious tradition and the atheists who simply oppose religion, usually in the name of some kind of materialism or humanism, or perhaps in the name of nothing at all.