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3-23-2009

March 23, 2009: Another Reason to be Secular

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Ledewitz, B. (2009). March 23, 2009: Another Reason to be Secular. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/ledewitz-hallowedsecularism/266>

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Date: 2009-03-23T21:47:00.000-04:00

3/23/2009—Want another reason why the young are turning away from religion? Look no further than the New York Times story on March 22, in the Week in Review Section. The story tells how Orthodox Jewish influence is growing in the Israeli army and how its teachings influenced some military in the Gaza fighting: A Religious War in Israel's Army, by Ethan Bronner. Some of the damning facts are not really in dispute. In Israel the ultra-Orthodox are exempt from military service. But modern Orthodox are not. As leaked by Dany Zamir, an investigation of alleged army atrocities in Gaza, including unnecessary civilian deaths, revealed testimony like the following: "the rabbinate brought in a lot of booklets and articles and their message was very clear: We are the Jewish people, we came to this land by a miracle, God brought us back to this land and now we need to fight to expel the non-Jews who are interfering with our conquest of this holy land. This was the main message, and the whole sense many soldiers had in this operation was of a religious war." The military's chief rabbi, Avichai Rontzki, publicized this slogan from a classic Jewish source: "He who is merciful to the cruel will end up being cruel to the merciful." There is a religious left in Israel that argues against these interpretations of the Jewish tradition. But, from the point of view of the young, who needs a religion that can be interpreted to promote hatred and violence? Better to be secular.