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April 15, 2010: Why William Connolly “is not a secularist”

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Title: Why William Connolly "is not a secularist"

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4/15/2010—William Connolly, a professor of political science at The Johns Hopkins University, wrote *Why I Am Not a Secularist* in 1999. It addresses the question I wrote about in *American Religious Democracy*—the legitimacy of religious discourse in political life. This is the issue that keeps coming up—when, for example, the Mormon Church encourages its members to support Proposition 8 in California—the ultimately successful effort to reverse legalized gay marriage--and they do so to such an extent that Proposition 8 would probably not have passed without their support. Some opponents of Proposition 8 claimed that this represented a violation of the separation of church and state. Connolly shows why this kind of claim is false in a fundamental sense. I will return to Connolly in future posts, but here is an example of his criticism of the insistence on religion-free politics:

"Academic secularists are almost the only partisans today who consistently purport to leave their religious and metaphysical baggage at home." (37) Not only does this open the secularist to the charge of hypocrisy for bringing her own baggage along, it actually is hypocrisy because there is no metaphysically-free position. This last point is crucial for the self-understanding of secularism. The project of John Rawls was to "ground secular justice...without invoking 'controversial' religious and metaphysical conceptions." If that cannot be done, secularism will have to cease claiming that unlike religion it is simply rational. I'm not sure that Connolly succeeds in his effort to ground politics "in an ethos of engagement between multiple constituencies honoring a variety of moral sources and metaphysical orientations." (39) But he clearly does succeed in envisioning a more liberal politics in which everyone, including religious believers, has a place.