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September 1, 2010: Is Eat Pray Love Religious?

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Title: Is Eat Pray Love Religious?

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9/1/2010—This may seem like an odd question, given that one-third of Elizabeth Gilbert's spiritual memoir is set in an Indian Ashram, where she goes in order to attain enlightenment, and given that the book is filled with references to God. But it is a very serious question and I intend to assign a bit of the book in my class in the spring entitled Secularism and Religion in the Public Square and ask my students the same question. Here is the issue. The whole idea of the separation of church and state in a constitutional sense depends on there being a difference between the secular and the religious. But the genuinely religious quest that Gilbert is on is so non-supernatural and so filled with experiences that any secularist could have (and that some secularists have already had) that a sharp distinction between profane and sacred seems impossible. For example, why could a secularist not experience the mystical embrace of oneness in consciousness? Secularists think they should not speak that way. But, why not? Gilbert's mantra was originally, Om Namah Shivaya: I honor the divinity that resides within me. So, what if the American national motto were one Nation under the Divinity that Resides in Each of Us? Would that be religious and perhaps unconstitutional, or secular and just fine? Even more fundamental than the legal question is the cultural one. Why shouldn't secularism be open to expressions of mystery and depth? Of course a secularism like that would be Hallowed Secularism.