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2-5-2011

February 5, 2011: What is the Relationship Among Democracy, Religion, Science and Capitalism?

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Repository Citation

Ledewitz, B. (2011). February 5, 2011: What is the Relationship Among Democracy, Religion, Science and Capitalism?. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/ledewitz-hallowedsecularism/502>

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Title: What is the Relationship Among Democracy, Religion, Science and Capitalism?

Date: 2011-02-05T06:12:00.002-05:00

2/5/2011—I am giving the students in my Secularism course (“Secularism and Religion in the Public Square”) an assignment this coming Tuesday, which, although it is given urgency by events in the Arab world, was planned before the semester started. The assignment is to chart the possible relationships among democracy, religion, science and capitalism and then to come to some sort of provisional judgment. To simplify, I suggest a grid running from necessary to good to bad to fatal. Thus for example capitalism might be necessary for democracy, good for democracy, bad for democracy or fatal for democracy (as Marx would have said). And the relationships also run the other way. Democracy might be good for science but bad for religion. Some mathematician in the class will have to tell me how many possible relationships there are in all. Since with each category, starting with democracy, there are 12 possibilities and there are four starting points, I think the total number is 12 to the fourth power. Events in Egypt have given impetus to these questions. Democracy in Egypt might be impeded by the likelihood of formal religious participation—the Muslim Brotherhood—and the lack of an open economy and scientific tradition. (Obviously, this example suggests other variables as well, for example equality of women and a free media.) We have conflicted ideas about the above relationships. Some Americans think that a religious democracy is impossible. Others, that a secular democracy is impossible because of an implied long-term descent into nihilism. The same conflict is apparent in our thinking about economics. With regard to China, many Americans believe that a vibrant, increasingly private economy must bring democracy. But domestically, we worry about the anti-democratic tendencies of corporate power. And there is a lot we don’t know. After the end of the medieval period in Europe, democracy, secularism, science and capitalism all eventually achieved their current status. But was this common ascent necessary or a coincidence? Think here of the Free Soil Party in the United States, which in 1848 adopted the slogan, “Free soil, free speech, free labor, and free men.”