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6-6-2011

June 6, 2011: Just What or Who is God and Who Believes in God?

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Repository Citation

Ledewitz, B. (2011). June 6, 2011: Just What or Who is God and Who Believes in God?. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/ledewitz-hallowedsecularism/542>

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Title: Just What or Who is God and Who Believes in God?

Date: 2011-06-06T11:04:00.001-04:00

6/6/2011—On Sunday, May 29, the New York Times reviewed a new translation of the 15th-century Indian poet Kabir. Kabir was a part of the Hindu bhakti movement, even though he was born to parents who had converted to Islam. One aspect of that movement has to do with God. Here is what August Kleinzahler writes in the review: “Bhakti encouraged the informal over the formal, the spontaneous over the prescribed and the vernacular over Sanskrit. It disregarded class distinction. It regarded no single religion as providing the exclusive way to God. Scripture was seen as an impediment to the union of worshiper and God, a union Kabir describes in erotic language: ‘Lying beside you, / I’m waiting to be kissed. / But your face is turned / And you’re fast asleep. . . / I have one husband: you. / You have one wife: me. / Who’s there to come between us? / Beware, says Kabir, / Of the man you love. / He can be a tricky customer.’ Bhakti was a Pan-Indian movement. Kabir is its greatest poetic exemplar.” But what does Kabir teach us about disputes in American constitutional law? One of the issues in the caselaw has to do with minority believers, such as Buddhists and Hindus. Justice Scalia thinks that God may be worshipped in the public square and that nonmonotheist believers may be disregarded. The example of Kabir, though, suggests that this division is too facile. There may be a place for God-language in those traditions as well. This does not mean that Justice Scalia is correct, however. He is assuming that God can only mean one thing—the single creator supernatural being. That is not necessarily what Kabir is referring to. Indeed, it may not be what some people in the monotheistic traditions are referring to. We can go another step here. Not only might nonmonotheistic believers have a sense of God, but nonbelievers as well. After all, atheists usually only reject the supernatural creator God. They don’t necessarily reject the intimate experience of unity that Kabir is trying to describe.