

Duquesne University

Duquesne Scholarship Collection

Hallowed Secularism

The Collective Works of Bruce Ledewitz, Adrian
Van Kaam C.S.Sp. Endowed Chair in Scholarly
Excellence and Professor of Law

7-10-2011

July 10, 2011: What is God, Anyway?

Bruce Ledewitz

Duquesne University, ledewitz@duq.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dsc.duq.edu/ledewitz-hallowedsecularism>



Part of the [Constitutional Law Commons](#), and the [Law and Philosophy Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Ledewitz, B. (2011). July 10, 2011: What is God, Anyway?. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/ledewitz-hallowedsecularism/555>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Collective Works of Bruce Ledewitz, Adrian Van Kaam C.S.Sp. Endowed Chair in Scholarly Excellence and Professor of Law at Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Hallowed Secularism by an authorized administrator of Duquesne Scholarship Collection. For more information, please contact beharyr@duq.edu.

Title: What is God, Anyway?

Date: 2011-07-10T06:09:00.003-04:00

7/10/2011—When I propose that the word God in the public square can be reinterpreted along nonreligious lines, as in reality is trustworthy in the national motto, I am often accused of attempting to change, or worse, pretend to change, the definition of God. The charge was most recently raised by an anonymous critic on the American Constitution Society's Book Talk [site](#), with the following comment:

“So your solution to the problem is to change the meaning of the word God? Or at least, to change the meaning of it for those people who care that a constitutional violation would be taking place unless the meaning of the word changed? And this is accomplished how? Buying your book is no doubt the first step, but if you were to give a preview, do we call up all the dictionary publishers and tell them to change their entries?”

Now, I keep pointing out that my suggested usages of God are not only well established outside the religious traditions, as in John Dewey, they actually exist within the religious traditions themselves—famously Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan created an entire Jewish movement, Reconstructionist Judaism, by considering God “the power that makes good possible”. I also point out that government would have to credibly maintain a nonmonotheist position to take advantage of my proposal.

But I am beginning to wonder what even my critics mean by God. Survey after survey shows that overwhelmingly, most Americans believe in God. Here is some detail from Wikipedia: “A late 2009 online Harris poll of 2,303 U.S. adults (18 and older) found that ‘82% of adult Americans believe in God’, the same number as in two earlier polls in 2005 and 2007. Another 9% said they did not believe in God, and 9% said that they were not sure. It further concluded, ‘Large majorities also believe in miracles (76%), heaven (75%), that Jesus is God or the Son of God (73%), in angels (72%), the survival of the soul after death (71%), and in the resurrection of Jesus (70%).’”

But the traditional God of Christian theology functioned in a very particular way and I wonder if this is what people still mean. For example, Alison Lurie was reviewing the book *Pulse* by Julian Barnes in the *New York Review of Books* in the June 9, 2011 issue and asked what has happened to Oscar Wilde's rule for literature: “The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. This is what Fiction means.” It has been amended by Tom Stoppard: “The bad end unhappily, the good unluckily. That is what tragedy means.” Lurie says that “only genre fiction” now reliably ends happily.

Why the preference for the downbeat? One explanation among others is “that most of us no longer believe in a God who will make everything clear to us eventually, or a happy afterlife in which all sorrow will be at an end.”

Maybe this explanation is wrong in its premise. But that God is the God of St. Paul: “For now we see through a glass, darkly, but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. ...” (I Cor. 13). Is that our God?