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August 20, 2011: Ronald Dworkin Fails to Learn His Lesson

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8/20/2011—Readers of my books are aware that I have been critical of the question that Ronald Dworkin put in his 2006 book, *Is Democracy Possible Here?* Dworkin described America as at a decision point with regard to religion and secularism the public square: Should we be a religious nation, collectively committed to values of faith and worship, but with tolerance for religious minorities including nonbelievers? Or should we be a nation committed to thoroughly secular government but with tolerance and accommodation for people of religious faith? A religious nation that tolerates nonbelief? Or a secular nation that tolerates religion? I have felt that trying to answer a question like this is extremely destructive of community in America. Dworkin is dooming us to years of vicious political struggle. If you want to see what that controversy will be like, just review what happened when NBC left the words “under God” out of the Pledge of Allegiance this past spring, which led to Rep. Todd Akin’s inflammatory charge that “at the heart of liberalism really is a hatred for God.” But Dworkin himself should have come to this conclusion in light of his own comments about the disastrous congressional elections of 2010, when the Republicans captured the House. In a short piece in the *New York Review of Books* in December 2010, Dworkin somewhat discounted the obvious economic reasons for the decline in votes for the Democratic Party. Instead, Dworkin was inclined to credit the feeling of some voters that they “are losing their country.” Now obviously in large part Dworkin believes this has to do with President Obama’s race. But there is also the religious angle: “Obama isn’t one of them in other ways as well: in the period since he was elected it’s become clearer that he is uncomfortable with the tastes, rhetoric, and reflexive religiosity they identify as at the heart of American political culture.” But this is precisely the point. Dworkin has helped set up this problem for liberals. He has insisted that liberals define America as a secular society “tolerating”—a really stupid word for the beliefs of around 80% of the American people—religion. That is what discomferts many ordinary voters. Dworkin fails to connect these dots. If you try, as a nonbeliever, to answer Dworkin’s question, you are going to experience many more elections like that of 2010.