

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

3-19-2012

March 19, 2012: Without Gods

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. (2012). March 19, 2012: Without Gods. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/ledewitz-hallowedsecularism/630>

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: Without Gods

Date: 2012-03-19T17:30:00.001-04:00

3/19/2012—In yesterday's New York Times Book Review, David Brooks reviewed *Religion for Atheists* by Alain de Botton. De Botton was lucky enough to be allowed to use the word "guide" in his subtitle—*A Non-Believer's Guide to the Uses of Religion*. As the reader of this blog may remember, my original subtitle for *Hallowed Secularism* was "A Guide for the Non-Believer" but Palgrave didn't like it. Brooks sums up de Botton's thesis very well: "De Botton looks around and sees a secular society denuded of high spiritual aspiration and practical moral guidance." There is now a drumbeat about the failings of secular society, which I wrote about in all three of my books, including the last section of *Church, State and the Crisis in American Secularism*. De Botton is describing a society that has too much faith in the power of the individual to self-educate. All that matters today is individual autonomy. De Botton is skeptical of such individual accomplishment. What is needed is social reinforcement. Brooks writes: "De Botton is not calling for a religious revival. He finds it impossible to take faith in God seriously. He assumes that none of his educated readers could possibly believe in spooky ghosts in the sky. Instead, he is calling on secular institutions to adopt religion's pedagogy, to mimic the rituals, habits and teaching techniques that churches, mosques and synagogues perfected over centuries. For example, religious people were smart enough to combine spirituality and eating, aware that while dining in a group, people tend to be in a convivial, welcoming mood. De Botton believes that secular people should create communal restaurants that mimic the Passover Seder. Atheists would sit at big, communal tables. They would find guidebooks in front of them, reminiscent of the Jewish Haggadah or the Catholic missal. The rituals of the meal would direct diners to speak with one another, asking questions of their neighbors like 'Whom can you not forgive?' or 'What do you fear?'" Ultimately, Brooks finds de Botton's book lacking for a crucial reason—but it is by no means the fault of the author. The problem with de Botton's prescriptions is that unlike classic religion, "a person's whole destiny and soul" are not at stake. Brooks calls this secular life a flatland—the very notion I used in *Hallowed Secularism* on page 53: "The secular world is flat." This is a very deep criticism, but Brooks cannot do anything with it. Brooks is apparently of the view that one must choose between the implausible depth of traditional religion and the flatness of secularism. But he is wrong about that.