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### April 15, 2012: Atheism is Growing

Bruce Ledewitz

*Duquesne University*, ledewitz@duq.edu

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Title: Atheism is Growing

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4/15/2012—While the big news this week is clearly the quasi-declaration of political war on the Obama Administration by the Bishops, which I will be addressing when I have had a chance to fully digest it--Our First, Most Cherished Liberty—there is important other news. This week's The Week reports on The Rise of Atheism. Yet what kind of atheism is it? Still only 1.5-4% of Americans label themselves atheists. On the other hand, a huge and growing group, now estimated to be 19% of the population have left organized religion. This group has been labeled the Nones because when asked their religion, they often answer, "none." How to account for the gap between atheists and nones? Well, it might be cowardice, intellectual and spiritual dishonesty, or just laziness. But I think there is another factor. In the same issue of the magazine, Executive Editor Robert Love apparently one of the nones, reports on his own pilgrimage to the summit of Bear Mountain in upstate New York. He writes, "We've been claimed by the atheists, but I'm more in sync with the pantheists or casual Buddhists. I'd also include in my tribe the Hudson River School of painters, who found transcendence in the beauty of the wilderness and the vastness of creation. For Thomas Cole, the founder of the school, nature was the 'visible hand of God.'" This is not only a beautiful statement, but an important one. It is culturally apt. It echoes a statement by Isaac Newton in a letter to Richard Bentley that I read in the New York Review of Books article by G.W. Bowersock. When contemplating the regular relationship of the sun to the planets, Newton wrote, "I do not think explicable by mere natural causes, but am forced to ascribe it to the counsel and contrivance of a Voluntary Agent." Nothing about our existence suggests to us contingency and accident. We are at home. This universe is fit for us and for our purposes. Naturally that is true since we evolved here—it is true naturally. But how does it all fit together so well? So we Nones say, there must be some force or power. An inelegant expression, but worlds away from a certain kind of atheist tone.