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8-22-2012

### August 22, 2012: The Sacred is the Profane

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#### Repository Citation

Ledewitz, B. (2012). August 22, 2012: The Sacred is the Profane. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/ledewitz-hallowedsecularism/669>

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Title: The Sacred is the Profane

Date: 2012-08-22T06:00:00.004-04:00

8/22/2012—Every day, it seems, there comes another indication of our vicious divisions over religion. Some group or business that never claimed religious exemptions before objects to a policy that they really oppose politically or some secular group finds religion to be irrational or dangerous, or both. Mutual respect is quite gone.

At the same time, there are efforts to dissolve the religion/nonreligion binary. One such effort will be published in October: *The Sacred is the Profane: The Political Nature of Religion*, by William Arnal (University of Regina) and Russell T. McCutcheon (University of Alabama).

I read about this forthcoming book on the CLR Forum at St John's Law School. Here is the book description by the publisher:

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*The Sacred Is the Profane* collects nine essays written over several years by William Arnal and Russell McCutcheon, specialists in two very different areas of the field (one, a scholar of Christian origins and the other working on the history of the modern study of religion). They share a convergent perspective: not simply that both the category and concept "religion" is a construct, something that we cannot assume to be "natural" or universal, but also that the ability to think and act "religiously" is, quite specifically, a modern, political category in its origins and effects, the mere by-product of modern secularism.

These collected essays, substantially rewritten for this volume, advance current scholarly debates on secularism—debates which, the authors argue, insufficiently theorize the sacred/secular, church/state, and private/public binaries by presupposing religion (often under the guise of such terms as "religiosity," "faith," or "spirituality") to historically precede the nation-state. The essays return, again and again, to the question of what "religion"—word and concept—accomplishes, now, for those who employ it, whether at the popular, political, or scholarly level. The focus here for two writers from seemingly different fields is on the efficacy, costs, and the tactical work carried out by dividing the world between religious and political, church and state, sacred and profane.

As the essays make clear, this is no simple matter. Part of the reason for the incoherence and at the same time the stubborn persistence of both the word and idea of "religion" is precisely its multi-faceted nature, its plurality, its amenability to multiple and often self-contradictory uses. Offering an argument that builds as they are read, these papers explore these uses, including the work done by positing a human orientation to "religion," the political investment in both the idea of religion and the academic study of religion, and the ways in which the field of religious studies works to shape, and stumbles against, its animating conception.

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There is much here for thinking. But the problem is the distance it reflects between the lived experience of religion and discussions of it. This is not an approach that will help heal us, which to some extent is presumably the goal of these two scholars.