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January 13, 2013: Why Tolerate Religion? Because Secularists Need It

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Title: Why Tolerate Religion? Because Secularists Need It

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1/13/2013—I have not finished Brian Leiter’s new book, *Why Tolerate Religion?*, in which he argues not that religion should be prohibited, but that religion is just another form of conscience driven behavior that deserves a certain level of protection in a liberal society. (I think he will argue later in the book that all such claims are subject to the needs of public policy, so this protection may not be very great). But I can already make a few points. First, I have to say that I agree with Leiter’s definition of religion to a great extent. Leiter states that the religious state of mind is distinguished by two factors—that there are some beliefs so central to the religion that they issue in “categorical demands” of action no matter what the arguments of the nonreligious world and these beliefs do not answer ultimately to evidence and reason as understood by science. (34). By this definition, Dworkin is right that the belief in the objective value of human life is essentially religious. What Leiter fails to see is that by this definition, the draft cases were rightly decided and most of us are religious. Most of our beliefs are not based on evidence and reason, but on something deeper. Second, two other claims for religion recognized by Leiter but not developed, show how much secularists need religion to be reminded of the possibilities of human existence in reality. Religion provides a “metaphysics of ultimate reality” (47) and is “pervaded by a sense of mystery.” (52). This is why, as Leiter acknowledges, religious people are more willing than anyone else to sacrifice themselves and provide counter-cultural witness, both for good—opposition in Nazi Germany and South Africa—and evil—blowing up abortion clinics and buildings and buses. (36-37). Religious life is lived at a greater depth. But this is why we secularists need religion and need to protect it. You don’t have to have belief in the supernatural to live life this way, but maybe you need people who do have such beliefs or others like them to be reminded of this way of living. I want to stand Leiter on his head. The crucial claims of conscience are in fact religious, even by his lights. We need to tolerate religion and do not generally need to tolerate anything else.