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7-7-2013

July 7, 2013: The Face of Secularization

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Repository Citation

Ledewitz, B. (2013). July 7, 2013: The Face of Secularization. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/ledewitz-hallowedsecularism/759>

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Title: The Face of Secularization

Date: 2013-07-07T15:25:00.002-04:00

7/7/2013—I have been asked on numerous occasions what I mean by the term secularism. Charles Taylor, in his book *A Secular Age* gave three descriptions of secularity: the decline of affiliation with religion, the withdrawal of religious imagery from the public square and public life, and the decline or difficulty in belief—that belief in religion is merely an option. By secularization I point to all three of these phenomena. But when I speak of a secularist, I mean only the first. Secularists are not institutionally involved with organized religion. It is this aspect of secularization that is rapidly growing in America. A vignette from last week will illustrate the point. Not only are people not going to church, the young increasingly do not know anything about religion. One of the firefighters who died in the super fire last week was remembered in San Francisco, where I guess he came from. A kind of memorial service was held honoring his memory and National Public Radio covered a part of that service. It was a very informal. I think it took place outside. Much time was taken telling stories about this person who seemed to have been a genuinely wonderful young man. Toward the end, when things were winding down, someone announced that the group would recite The Lord's Prayer. Then this person added, clearly to be courteous, "if you don't know it, please bear with us." This was striking. Yes, it is true that many millions of Americans have not known of The Lord's Prayer. Jews for example might not have known it. But it is fair to say that since 80 or 90% of Americans have always been Christian, in a public gathering it could be assumed that everyone knew the Lord's Prayer. Apparently, this is no longer true. And since this service took place among the friends and family of this young firefighter, it must especially not be true among the young. That is my impression. Secularization in America is going to mean that more and more people simply have no contact with the images and rhythm and language of the Bible. That is quite a different America.