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12-27-2014

December 27, 2014: Religion as Tool, Not Identity

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Repository Citation

Ledewitz, B. (2014). December 27, 2014: Religion as Tool, Not Identity. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/ledewitz-hallowedsecularism/895>

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Title: Religion as Tool, Not Identity

Date: 2014-12-27T09:04:00.001-05:00

12/27/2014—In America, if you ask someone whether she is religious, you will probably get an identity-type answer, as in, “I am a Christian.” And you may get more specific identities—I am a Presbyterian or I am an Orthodox Jew. The reason Americans answer that way is the monotheistic tradition in the West. Under monotheism, a person follows one God, as reflected in one religious tradition. Increasingly, however, this approach is not helpful to some people. Some people do not find any religious tradition that speaks to them as a whole. Instead, they might want a Christmas service for beauty, a Yom Kippur service for repentance and a Buddhist ceremony for tranquility. The monotheistic traditions hate this sort of thing. They even have a critical name for it—syncretism. A person is supposed to belong to one place of worship in one tradition. There is something to be said for a one-church life, especially the communal aspects in a fragmented and individualistic world. But this life is not for everyone. I am told that in China, there is much more mixing and matching of religious traditions, especially Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism. (I don’t know about the over 100 million Christians in China—but you can hear the identity language in my describing them as “Christians”). I believe that genuine spiritual seekers—a horrible term because of its humanistic implications—must break this church monopoly and must free their minds to think of the religious traditions as tools in a lifetime of discovery rather than as limiting identity. The hard part of this is to know enough to be able to participate in the different ceremonies and traditions of each religion. That requires real study. The other problem is that the one-church people may be insulted. There is less and less of that, thankfully. Another problem, though, is the potential absence of humility in the religion-as-tool approach. It suggests that humans are in control, using religion. Tool may be a bad image. So, perhaps instead, it would be better to think of the religious traditions as signal receivers, like radio telescopes, and the realm of the divine as a gigantic transmitter. Then one could say that she finds the signal strong in some contexts but not others. And we go from tradition to tradition, trying to gain signal strength. The fault then could well be in ourselves rather than in the religious traditions. Nevertheless, better to move the radio than to miss the program.