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5-16-2017

May 16, 2017: When All the Churches are Gone

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Repository Citation

Ledewitz, B. (2017). May 16, 2017: When All the Churches are Gone. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/ledewitz-hallowedsecularism/1089>

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Title: When All the Churches are Gone

Date: 2017-05-16T20:12:00.004-04:00

5/16/2017—Last Sunday, Mother's Day, I attended a service at a small church in upstate New York. I say a small church in the sense that 35 or 40 people might attend on a typical Sunday, mostly older people, who all know each other very well. This church is typical of thousands of churches all across the country. The service was very nice. The minister, part-time of course, as these things go, reminded us of the virtues and importance of mothering. And she gave quite a sophisticated interpretation of the life and meaning of a rather obscure figure: Tabatha in the Book of Acts. Two things really struck me. First, at several points during the service, mention was made of all of the activities engaged in by the members of the small church-- feeding the poor, helping the elderly, contributing to the community in various ways. It may be that all of the members of the congregation are conservatives politically, but they cannot be the typical anti-government, liberal hating ideologues of modern-day conservatism. They are decent people dedicated to finding the good in others and contributing in every way they can to the good of society. And they all seemed to find in the gospel the reason for being this way and acting this way. There is nothing extraordinary in this. You can find the same thing in churches everywhere. It was nicely summed up by the minister in the following phrase: "this is a small church, but it has a big impact." But this church is slowly dying and even if it survives, it will do so only by taking in members from other churches that have died. Christianity in the society as a whole is just drying up. But clearly churches served as the backbone of the community, especially in small towns like the one I was in on Sunday. What happens when the churches are all gone? It is typically American to say, you can be good without God. It is true, I suppose, for any individual. But it may not be true for society as a whole. It is necessary that society have a reservoir of people doing good. And for better or worse, that reservoir used to lie in our churches. There are other institutions that do good things. But there are no other institutions, aside from religious ones, that train people to do good and to think about doing good. Government will never be a substitute for that. When all the churches are gone, we will not be a community, but only a collection of individuals.