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6-21-2021

June 21, 2021: What is the Future of Secularism?

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Repository Citation

Ledewitz, B. (2021). June 21, 2021: What is the Future of Secularism?. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/ledewitz-hallowedsecularism/1374>

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Title: What is the Future of Secularism?

Date: 2021-06-21T02:01:00.003-04:00

6/21/2021—I have wondered a lot about the future of secularism. My forthcoming book, *The Universe Is on Our Side: Restoring Faith in American Public Life*, is about the worldview of secularism. American culture is demoralized by the Death of God. We hate each other because we have no story of meaning in common. But there is nothing much in the book about the sociology of secularism—what its lifestyle looks like. I assumed that something like religious institutions had to grow in the place of religion. Austin Dacey, the author of *The Secular Conscience*, had the best answer for that back in 2009—he called it the fallacy of decomposition in an entry in *Religion Dispatches*: “The fallacy of decomposition is the mistake of supposing that as the estate of religion collapses, there must be a single new institution that arises to serve the same social functions it served—that the social space vacated by religion must be filled by a religion-shaped object.” It was never going to be that and Dacey explained why pretty sharply: When you think about it, organized humanism is a hard sell. Do you like paying dues and making forced pleasantries over post-service coffee cake, but can’t stand beautiful architecture and professionally trained musicians? If so, organized humanism may be for you. Greg Epstein (the “humanist chaplain” at Harvard and the author of *Good Without God*) is a lovely person, but I’ve heard him sing, and I think I’ll stick to Bach, Arvo Pärt, and Kirk Franklin for my spiritual uplift. Do we really need an institution for people who find Reform Judaism and Unitarian Universalism too rigid? Yes. It’s called the weekend. But I am coming to see that there is one arena in which something like religion is necessary—the raising of children. How is the spirituality of secular children to be addressed? If it is not addressed—and at present it really is not—the culture will substitute consumption and nihilism for any sense of depth of human life.