

Duquesne University

Duquesne Scholarship Collection

Hallowed Secularism

The Collective Works of Bruce Ledewitz, Adrian
Van Kaam C.S.Sp. Endowed Chair in Scholarly
Excellence and Professor of Law

6-12-2011

June 12, 2011: Graduation Prayer and the Defense of Secular Government

Bruce Ledewitz

Duquesne University, ledewitz@duq.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dsc.duq.edu/ledewitz-hallowedsecularism>



Part of the [Constitutional Law Commons](#), and the [Law and Philosophy Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Ledewitz, B. (2011). June 12, 2011: Graduation Prayer and the Defense of Secular Government. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/ledewitz-hallowedsecularism/545>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Collective Works of Bruce Ledewitz, Adrian Van Kaam C.S.Sp. Endowed Chair in Scholarly Excellence and Professor of Law at Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Hallowed Secularism by an authorized administrator of Duquesne Scholarship Collection. For more information, please contact beharyr@duq.edu.

Title: Graduation Prayer and the Defense of Secular Government

Date: 2011-06-12T11:56:00.004-04:00

6/12/2011--Austin Cline has criticized my defense of high school graduation prayer at About.com. Obviously, I am grateful for him for doing this. Only in this way will secularism get real about its commitments. Cline notes that I claim a need for “communal expressions of meaning” and rightly says that this umbrella would justify any such expression, including religious ones. Readers of this blog and my new book, however, are aware that I agree with Cline that government endorsement of religion is unconstitutional. Our difference is that I would not deny the use by government of traditional religious imagery to express messages that are not themselves religious. A Ten Commandments display to express the commitment that justice is real is not religious. More generally, Cline asks why any such communal expressions of meaning are necessary? This is a good question. Why are people so anxious that there be communal prayer? Partly the answer is a desire for praise of the supernatural God of monotheism and Cline and I agree that this should be considered unconstitutional. But it might well be instead a communal desire to express what Justice O’Connor once called confidence in the future. We might want to express our mythic hopes and dreams. We might want a taste of transcendence. And we might want a sense that we belong together. Americans have always had at least this creed—that all men are created equal and that we are endowed with rights that are not the gift of government. So what if the Declaration of Independence used the word Creator to make that point? The point is still political, not religious. Cline says that my criticism of some secularists as thinking that “any communal expression is too close to religion to be permitted” is a straw man. Actually, I believe that Cline represents precisely this tendency himself. Otherwise, I don’t understand why “prayer” would be unconstitutional. Prayer, after all, need not include any religious references. The French atheist Andre Comte-Sponville wrote in his marvelous book *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality* that “[l]ove and prayer are merely the highest form of attention” (quoting Simon Weil). What makes that problematic for Cline is precisely that prayer feels religious, not that it must always be religious. I do support separation of church and state. But I define “church” quite narrowly. I would love to see the government endorse all traditions of meaning that oppose relativism, materialism and nihilism. Many of those traditions are religious. But not all of them. Nothing about that endorsement would threaten secular government. As I’m sure Cline will agree, there is no necessary connection between secularism and relativism.