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3-1-2010

### The Future of God—and Secularism

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Ledewitz, B. (2010). The Future of God—and Secularism. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/ledewitz-papers/88>

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Tikkun, Volume 25, Number 2, March/April 2010, p. 50 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



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# THE FUTURE OF GOD—AND SECULARISM

by Bruce Ledewitz

**T**HE FUTURE OF GOD DEPENDS ON THE FUTURE OF secularism. Most people will hear in that sentiment a prediction about the growth of secularism: If secularism grows, belief in God will commensurately shrink. If secularism stagnates, the world will continue to believe in God in 2100.

A hundred years ago, such predictions would have seemed straightforward. At the height of the secularization thesis, it was assumed that religion would decline with the growth of science. But, with the resurgence of Islam, Christianity, and other faiths worldwide, the secularization thesis seemed discredited, as argued in books such as the recent *God is Back*.

Yet the secularization thesis has probably been dismissed too quickly. In March 2009, the American Religion Identification Survey reported that 15 percent of Americans have “no religion.” That report, coupled with President Barack Obama’s reference to “nonbelievers” in his Inaugural Address, means that America no longer understands itself as a purely religious society.

By 2100, I believe that the numbers of nonbelievers in the world will have increased dramatically. Surprisingly, however, secular growth is not the most important issue for the future of God. The question is, what kind of secularism will emerge? Currently, the New Atheists—people like Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins—dominate secular thought. They identify God as a supernatural being commanding the natural world and demanding submission from humankind. If this remains the message of secularism, this conception of God will also tend to remain dominant. Such a course of events would ultimately weaken belief in God because this is precisely the kind of God that science discredits.

Fortunately, another kind of secularism is emerging, one that would foretell a different future for God. In February 2009, Peter Steinfels called it the “new new atheism” and, in October, Daniel Burke used the term “Atheism 3.0.” These terms apply to writers such as Ronald Aronson, André Comte-Sponville, Austin Dacey,

and Greg Epstein. These thinkers defend ideas often associated with religion, such as the objectivity of values and the reality of mystical experience. I have called this phenomenon the “new new secularism” because some of these nonbelievers use the term God; for example, biologist Stuart Kauffman writes of God as the creativity at the heart of the universe.

It should come as no shock that God could entail much more than a supernatural being. There are plenty of religious believers who also see beyond the supernatural, including, of course, Rabbi Green in this issue of *Tikkun*. If secularism continues to grow in this direction, then conceptions of God that are not rooted in



“Desire (three pieces)” by Naomi Fuks-Mishol.

supernaturalism will grow as well. In such a world, believers and nonbelievers might begin to come together as their conceptions of reality overlap. And we could even see the end of disputes about references to God in the public square, as secular ideas about God become more sophisticated and inclusive. This is a future for God of harmony rather than division. It is not a future of holy war, but of holy community. ■

**ASK THE AUTHOR! March 8: Bruce Ledewitz**  
**6 p.m. Pacific Time (9 p.m. Eastern)**  
**Call 1-888-346-3950 for free! Then enter this code: 11978#**  
 See full schedule at [www.tikkun.org](http://www.tikkun.org)



*Bruce Ledewitz is professor of law at Duquesne University Law School. He is author of American Religious Democracy: Coming to Terms with the End of Secular Politics (2007) and Hallowed Secularism: Theory, Belief, Practice (2009).*