
Bruce Ledewitz’s American Religious Democracy is an important book. The book’s provocative subtitle—Coming to Terms with the End of Secular Politics—is enticingly confrontational in its assertion that “secular politics” as a reflection of the overwhelmingly dominant secularist consensus in American political, cultural and academic life in the 1960s and 1970s has now been effectively eclipsed by “religious democracy.”

Instinctively, many readers, especially those committed to that secular consensus, will react negatively to such confident assertions that the political belief system and worldview that has been the “natural order” of things during most of their conscious existence in this country has not suffered a few temporary tactical setbacks, but a long-term strategic defeat.

Nevertheless, they should read American Religious Democracy, as should anyone conservative or liberal, more religious or less religious, who cares about the role of the religious in American society and culture, including politics.

Ledewitz asserts, quite accurately, that the 2004 Presidential election results were the culmination of long-term historical and cultural trends within American life and that a significant epoch ended and another began on November 3, 2004.

In American Religious Democracy, Ledewitz relentlessly relieves secularism’s adherents of any lingering illusions about whether a momentous page has been turned in the American experiment called the United States of America. He commences the book with shocking directness:

Metaphorical walls do not fall as dramatically as physical ones. So it will be hard to name a moment of which one could say, before, the wall of separation between Church and State was standing; afterward, it was gone. In popular understanding, the wall is largely down. In the courts, the wall is breaking apart. In academia, the wall is only starting to fall. This book is partly a chronicle of the fall. Mostly, it is a bridge to the post-fall world.

(xi)
That this message should be declared so assertively and conclusively by Professor Ledewitz, a respected legal scholar and law school professor who discloses at numerous points in the book he is on the “left” side of most of the divisive social and political issues of our time, is both startling and arresting. But declare the message he did, without equivocation: “What was repudiated in the 2004 election was the wall of separation between Church and State. The very concept of a secular society was rejected. This was a cultural and religious, as much as a political, matter…” (9)

One of the more revealing parts of the book is Professor Ledewitz’s description of the complete dominance of secularism’s consensus during his law school years at Yale commencing in 1974. He reflects that “it would have been inconceivable for a student of Yale Law School in the mid-70s to refer to God as in any way relevant to the law” and that students simply “did not think about religion in a public sense.” (16)

As I read Ledewitz’s recollections of a secularist hegemony so dominant that it was assumed as part of the furniture in the room, I could not help but think of my own very similar experience of this life situation during my sojourn at Princeton just a few years earlier. Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright also reflects on the complete dominance of this secularist perspective in her diplomatic training and how it failed to prepare a whole generation of diplomats for the new religious realities of the twenty-first century world.1

*American Religious Democracy* is a remarkably clear-eyed, voluminously informed, yet readable analysis of the secularist consensus, its collapse, and how the country should proceed in the new American religious and political reality—“religious democracy.”

In Part I, Ledewitz describes with insightful detail and great insight how the secular ascendancy in American society declined and collapsed. In doing so, he demonstrates widespread comprehensive familiarity with the various legal, philosophical, and political writings on the subject and pauses to interact with them in an informative and often entertaining fashion. For example, Ledewitz refutes much of what Kevin Phillips asserts erroneously in *American Theocracy.*2 Ledewitz responds to Phillips’s conclusion that the Republican Party (circa 2004) was the first phenomenon of a political party representing “true-believing frequent

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churchgoers.” As follows:

Phillips’ statement is misleading. . . . It would have been more accurate for Phillips to have said that, in the 1960s, America developed for the first time a truly secular political party, one dedicated to the separation of religion from public life—the Democratic Party—and that in response, the American people chose to endorse religion and reject the secularization of the public square. (20)

*American Religious Democracy* is replete with such examples of a clear-eyed ability and willingness to take on and refute mistaken secularist assumptions.

In Part II, Ledewitz addresses the question of whether “religious democracy” is possible, or as is often assumed by many secularists, is an oxymoronic phrase. Ledewitz passionately believes that religious democracy is not only viable and possible, but that it opens up new possibilities that could make America a far better society in the long term.

As part of this discussion, Ledewitz takes the reader on a very informative journey to explain that the United States Constitution and its interpretation by the Supreme Court are not static and that over the long haul, the nation’s “political majority controls the Court.” (87) He also argues effectively that political activity motivated by religion is no more divisive or objectionable than other more secular motivations.

In Part III, Ledewitz makes a strong plea for those devoted to secularism to expand their definition of religion to include far more than the teaching of the world’s traditional religions. Instead, he urges them to accept a far more expansive definition of religion, or perhaps more accurately, spirituality:

As early as 1961, in *Torasco* [sic] *v. Watkins*, the Supreme Court described “religions in this country which do not teach what would generally be considered a belief in the existence of God . . . .” Later, in *United States v. Seeger*, the court granted conscientious objector status based on a belief that “occupies a place in the life of its possessor parallel to that filled by the orthodox belief in God . . . .” (156)

Ledewitz concludes that by such Supreme Court definitions “most Americans are religious, in the sense of openness to the transcendent realm, and that neither party has a monopoly, nor even a competitive advantage, in religion.” (156)

3. *Id.* at 172.
In language that certainly will chagrin the more orthodoxly religious, but encourage the more iconoclastically inclined, Ledewitz asks this provocative question: “Can one be a biblical believer without being a Jew or a Christian?” (169) He begins his answer this way:

[L]et me take myself as an example of what could be called the biblically oriented secularist. This secularist does not believe in God, meaning he does not believe that there is a separate being, a person, not a part of the observable universe, who has plans, and speaks, and wills. There is no one who could say, “Let there be light” or “This is my beloved son.” This places the secularist outside the Bible, which seems to begin with just the opposite understanding. . . . (169)

Ledewitz concludes that “perhaps a person with these beliefs should not be called a Jew or a Christian. That must be decided by Jews and Christians.” (169) He then asks, “but could such a person still be considered a believer, in the biblical understanding of faith?” (169) Ledewitz answers in the affirmative, and armed with this very expansive definition of secular beliefs, argues for their enthusiastic participation in “religious democracy.”

Ledewitz believes that “religious democracy” thus defined, opens a depth of political life that secular politics cannot reach and “might help America to become a better democracy.” (201)

What about the 2006 midterm election? Ledewitz anticipates that question in a brief “afterword” in which he argues that the 2006 midterms and their outcome were more about Iraq, scandal, and President Bush, than about religion. He maintains that midterm elections are fundamentally different from Presidential elections and that the central theses of American Religious Democracy stand unscathed by the 2006 election results.

American Religious Democracy will both challenge and inform all who take the time to read it. As one who would be far more traditionally Christian in my faith affirmations than Ledewitz, I found the book enormously helpful, thought-provoking, and informative. It will be close at hand for recurrent reference by me in the coming months and years.

Richard Land*