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Hallowed Secularism

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9-21-2007

### September 21, 2007: Hallowed Secularism and Humanism

Bruce Ledewitz

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Title: Hallowed Secularism and Humanism

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9/21/2007--Visiting family in Florida, I was reminded of the need to retrieve the history of humanism for the project of Hallowed Secularism. For example, in her New York Times book review of Norman Davies' book on WWII, *No Simple Victory* (9/9/2007), Susan Rubin Suleiman notes the following strange entry in the book: "[Kurt Vonnegut] succeeded Isaac Asimov as president of the American Humanist Association." I had forgotten that there is such a group, though it has been around for over 60 years. There is also an active movement called "Secular Humanistic Judaism". There are two points to be made here. One, why are we reinventing the wheel? Why, in other words, is there a new atheism when there is an old and established one? The second question concerns the quality and tone of this older humanism. Look at the quality and intellectual centrality of a Vonnegut and an Asimov. These were giants of American letters and deeply educated and cultured persons. Hostility to religion was not their thing. Their thing was the human condition. Similarly, more or less the founder of Jewish Humanism as a movement, Rabbi Sherwin Wine, who was killed in an automobile accident in Morocco in July, was a towering figure and a serious and pastoral religious leader. And, more generally, the thinking of humanism in its heyday, with the drafting of the Humanist Manifesto in 1933, was not opposition to religion, but the creation of a secular civilization with a complex relationship to religion. I guess I am saying that the project of Hallowed Secularism, although quite religious in tone, may be closer to the humanist tradition than is the current atheist enthusiasm. John Dewey, for example, a signer of that Manifesto, was always aware of what religion had, and could, bring to human life.