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Hallowed Secularism

The Collective Works of Bruce Ledewitz, Adrian  
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12-13-2007

### December 13, 2007: Physician Assisted Suicide

Bruce Ledewitz

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Title: Physician Assisted Suicide

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12/13/2007--What is at stake in the proposed 2008 Washington State referendum on physician assisted suicide? The State of Washington allows voters to pass laws directly and physician-assisted suicide may be on the ballot there in November 2008.

The New York Times Sunday Magazine on December 2 ran a thoughtful article by Daniel Bergner dealing with this issue in general and the Washington State context in particular. Former Governor Booth Gardner is pushing the initiative. Gardner has Parkinson's disease, which he says has personalized the issue for him. The religious opposition was symbolized in the article by Gardner's son. The secular opposition was represented by University of Minnesota Law and Medical Schools Professor Susan Wolf.

Gardner's position was dramatically and simply set forth: "My life, my death, my control." His son's position was equally clear: "Dad's...trying to usurp God's authority."

But what of the secular opposition to physician-assisted suicide? Referring to the slogan of "my control", "Wolf wondered whether autonomy was equally available to everyone. Absolute claims of individual rights... 'wrongly assume that all face serious illness and disability with the resources of the idealized rights bearer—a person of means untroubled by oppression.'" In other words, older women and persons with disabilities will be told one way or another to move on in a regime of assisted suicide.

Professor Wolf is right about that and it is a good enough reason to oppose the Washington initiative. But Hallowed Secularism does not accept the starting point of autonomy. Professor Wolf may be read to suggest that in an ideal world, each person would be in control. Hallowed Secularism points out, instead, that human beings are not in control. We don't control the world or even our own lives. And when we try to do so, we experience global warming and other environmental harms collectively and alienation individually.

I cannot say with Gardner's son, God will decide when I die. There is no cosmic will in charge in that way. If there were, I would be angry with it. But in a more generalized sense, something is in control rather than we. We could call it the tide or history or the power of good. And we must try to act in accordance with it. But there is both no one to ask for a time to die, nor is it sound for man to try to control his own mortality.

I saw this with my mother, who at this time is in Hospice. It had been her plan to kill herself when she was diagnosed with terminal cancer. She never got the chance. And then, because she did not want to lose control, she refused the full range of medication that Hospice was offering. At a certain point, I urged her to let go and not try any longer to rule. For my mother, as for me, this was not giving in to a superior will, like a God. It was a renunciation of a power that we never have to begin with. We only think we do.

So my mother finally did give up control and took the drugs and is now resting comfortably. Finally, she is in comportment toward the universe in a little more reasonable way.