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Hallowed Secularism

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1-1-2008

### January 1, 2008: The Failures of Secularism

Bruce Ledewitz

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Title: The Failures of Secularism

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1/1/2008--Here is an example of the trouble with secularism. My wife and I attended a small, progressive church in our neighborhood on the Sunday between Christmas and New Year. In an unassuming sermon, the minister urged those present to “be the good news of Christ to those less fortunate—the lost, the poor, the depressed.” Patt and I belong to a neighborhood group in Pittsburgh that is very close to this church in demographics and location. In our neighborhood group, however, we do not speak of service to the community very much. We are more likely to talk about how to protect our neighborhood from the threatening forces of urban decay. As you and I know very well, the difference in these two experiences is not that the churchgoers go out en masse to serve the world. We are all hypocrites, including churchgoers, neighborhood group members and blog authors. There are, however, two differences between the church and my neighborhood group. First, there actually is a small difference between what the Christians do compared to the non-Christians. The church is more likely to serve the downtrodden and less likely to view them as a threat to be avoided than are the rest of us. You can’t hear the message to be Christ to my neighbor—which is what Paul meant by “Christ lives in me”—52 times a year without some effect, however small. The second effect is more subtle. The cosmic scale that the church introduces—to be Christ is to participate in the ultimate human reality—creates the possibility of radical engagement and personal transformation. A young person might be set on fire for love and justice in the church. But this would never happen in a neighborhood group or any other secular setting I can think of. Indeed, the New Atheists, such as Mark Lilla, distrust the promise of transformation. They feel the same way that the Seventeenth Century did about religious “enthusiasm”—that it is a harbinger of fanaticism. But human beings need the hope of change. And beneficent, radical change is possible. The slaves are freed. Women are liberated. Human rights established. And such change becomes more possible when we are taught to be its agents. Secularism must learn how to be open to this.