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4-12-2009

April 12, 2009: The Victory Over Death

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Repository Citation

Ledewitz, B. (2009). April 12, 2009: The Victory Over Death. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/ledewitz-hallowedsecularism/274>

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Title: The Victory Over Death

Date: 2009-04-12T15:32:00.002-04:00

4/12/2009--Happy Easter to any Christian readers of this blog. Certainly, the Christian claim of victory over death is the key difference between Christianity and secularism. That claim has two aspects. One is the promise of an after-life in heaven. Surprisingly, this is clearly not what the early church thought Easter symbolized. Easter represented the preview of Christ's second coming when the faithful would all be resurrected, as Jesus had been. His resurrection had been the "first fruit" of the promise, as Paul put it. This early church understanding reflected the Jewish foundation of Christianity. By the time of Jesus' birth, many Jews had begun to expect a Messiah and an end time in which God would bring resurrection to the dead. But the Jewish understanding of heaven had not been worked out (indeed it never has really been worked out in Judaism). There are Christian writers, or writers out of a Christian perspective, such as Peter Berger, for whom this ultimate promise of victory over death is the crucial difference between the believer and the nonbeliever. But I wonder if this is true. If, as I expect, the West becomes ever more secular in orientation, this change may be reflected in an insistence that the natural laws of the universe are invariant. One of those laws is that life is physically based. There cannot be a heaven because our personalities are a part of the physical world. There is no Bruce Ledewitz without the body of Bruce Ledewitz. Thus, there cannot be a continuation of personality after death. This physicality rules out resurrection as well. If this view begins to infect even Christian believers, a kind of secular Christianity may begin to emerge. Indeed, such a Christianity may not even be distinguishable from Hallowed Secularism.