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December 22, 2008: A New Kind of Faith

Bruce Ledewitz

Duquesne University, ledewitz@duq.edu

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Title: A New Kind of Faith

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12/22/2008—I had the usual experience recently at a seasonal party of mentioning the word “truth” and hearing someone ask, “whose truth?” As C.S. Lewis once suggested, the commitment to the objectivity of values—the belief that some things really are wrong or beautiful—is the real dividing line between religious people and nonreligious people. And, as he also knew, that dividing line does not respect churches or professions of atheism. Many people who call themselves religious are relativists and many who do not, believe passionately in the objectivity of values: think of secular human rights activists. This observation brings forth strange bedfellows. Conservative jurisprudence is thoroughly relativistic, which is why Justice Scalia writes of history and text and never of truth. Some secularists understand how crucial the objectivity of values is. Sam Harris once proclaimed that he believed in objective right and wrong in a Newsweek interview. Austin Dacey has written a book—*The Secular Conscience*—defending the idea and criticizing secular relativism. The problem for secularists is that without God, the concept of the objectivity of values requires rethinking. As Charles Taylor puts it, the phenomenology of universality is frustrated by an ontology of immanence. Or, to be blunt, who stands behind goodness as a guarantee that it is real if there is no God? That rethinking has not yet been done. This is why “spirituality”, as in the common phrase “I am spiritual but not religious” is usually ethically and historically empty, reduced to personal experiences of transcendence. Truth is normative and operates in and through history. We have to make a public commitment, either expressly or with our lives. It seems to me that the belief in, and commitment to, the objectivity of values, of right and wrong in this context, is a faith claim. It is a faith claim not really different from belief in God, except that the laws of science lead to skepticism here differently than they do in regard to theism. Is the secularist willing to die for truth, knowing full well that there is no heaven and no Messiah for redemption? The answer can be yes, for this is a new kind of faith.