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January 15, 2012: Visiting the Center for Inquiry

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Title: Visiting the Center for Inquiry

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1/15/2012—It was a great deal of fun speaking to the Pittsburgh Chapter of the Center for Inquiry last Thursday night. My topic was a defense of the objectivity of values and a challenge in the relativism of American secularism—the same topic of my book, *Church, State, and the Crisis in American Secularism*. But when I finished, the widespread reaction was, “we don’t know what secularists you’ve been speaking to, but we are committed to the scientific tradition, so of course we accept the concept of truth. And we don’t doubt that truth can apply to morality as well as to other realms of knowledge.” So we talked about religion and truth. The people in this group are much more open to new ideas than are most of us. It turns out that there is real appreciation of the power of religion—and not in a negative sense—by a number of members, despite the reputation of the Center for opposition to religion. In fact, one person told a story about an event honoring Daniel Dennett and his book, *Breaking the Spell*. A speaker told the assembled one hundred or so people to pinch themselves. Then they all stood up and sang *Amazing Grace*. Afterward, the pinches were repeated. And they did not hurt. This story illustrates the power of myth and art and community. And it led me to ask how secularism is going to duplicate this power, this fulfillment. How is secularism going to teach love and self-sacrifice? The Thursday event also led me to wonder, if the people of the Center can appreciate religion for its good qualities, even though critical of religion as well, then why celebrate a Daniel Dennett at all? Why root for the end of religion? To paraphrase Gamaliel in the Book of Acts, if it is to be then it is to be.