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April 12, 2012: Reason Rally Update

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Title: Reason Rally Update

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4/12/2012—Tonight, the Center for Inquiry in Pittsburgh is having a meeting to talk about the experiences of some people who attended the Reason Rally in Washington. I am sorry I have to miss it due to heavy semester responsibilities.

Readers of this blog know that I have been very critical of the assumptions behind the rally—specifically that religious people are not committed to reason and that secular people are. But I would like to discuss these issues at the Center rather than just complaining on this blog. I talked about the Rally on Tuesday at an event at Duquesne discussing the concept of civility. Here is what I had to

say.***** Just as civility is represented by taking the arguments of others seriously, incivility is the refusal to recognize the claims of the other—a refusal to admit that I could, under other circumstances, hold the view that my opponent holds, even though I now believe that view to be wrong. Let me give an example of incivility. On Saturday, March 24, 2011, a rally was held by atheists, non-theists, secularists and others who claim to believe in reason and not God. They called their rally the “Reason Rally”. Now, what does that title, Reason Rally, mean? That religious believers are all unreasonable? That Thomas Aquinas did not follow reason? Worse, the name Reason Rally suggests that I really am reasonable, when we all know that our motives are always mixed. Freud laughs at someone who says he or she just follows the evidence. Such a claim is incivility at a high level. Similarly, in response to David Brooks in his review of Alain de Botton’s book Religion for Atheists, Roy Black wrote to the New York Times last week that that joy of religious contact is indistinguishable from wishful thinking and that it isn’t worth “suspending critical thinking and living what we know is a lie.” Now we don’t know any such thing about religion. We don’t know that the resurrection did not happen, for example. How would we know such a thing? If it did not happen, why didn’t the opponents of Jesus produce his body? And as for God, even the great physicist Werner Heisenberg asked “Was it utterly absurd to seek behind the ordering structures of this world a “consciousness” whose “intentions” were these very structures?”***** Let me give a more nuanced account. Let’s ask about the meaning of history. Is history a tale told by an idiot signifying nothing or is history an account of humanity’s climb away from tribalism to universal values? What will reason tell us about this? Nothing. But our decision here has enormous consequences. In terms of deep politics, reason is just not that important.