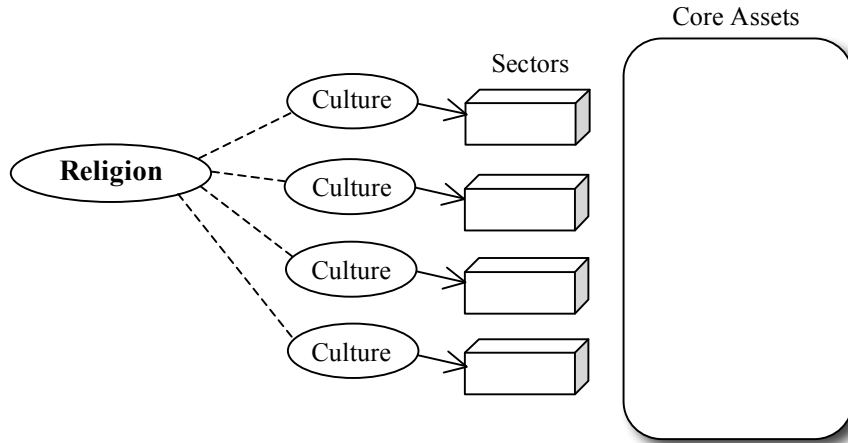


CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Mystery and Promise of Religion

Religion and Culture



There is more to human well-being than good food and good health, plenty of exercise and a decent income – all those attributes of human capital that one might quantify on a balance sheet. There is a spiritual side to human life that cannot be put on any balance sheet. To be human is to sense the presence of deeper mysteries. What a blessing it is that life exists at all. What a curse it is that sometimes we treat one another so miserably.

Organized religions offer us many ways to come into the presence of mystery. The Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East have given us Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the three religions that trace their roots to Abraham. Asia has given us Buddhism and Hinduism and other faiths as well.

In all its forms, religion always affects the shape and content of culture. And it often has a say in the shape and arrangement of power. Is the State to be dominated by the Church? Is Church to be under the thumb of the State? Are multiple Churches to be protected by the State?

Secular thinkers might imagine that the common good can be addressed without reference to religion, but I am convinced that would be a mistake. Religion is too potent a force, sometimes for ill and sometimes for good, to be set aside. Its contributions – and its flaws – both require careful attention. If we are to accept counsel from our rabbis and priests and pastors and clerics and monks, we shall have to take stock of religion and its major pluses and minuses. At its best, it provides deep inspiration and stirs us to be hearty stewards of the common good. At its least worthy, it makes self-centered demands that undercut the Creator's love for the whole of the human family.

I want to offer six propositions for our consideration. Faith communities of all sorts are here to stay, and each faith community offers its own truths to its members. Those of us who worship within faith communities have an obligation to worship in ways that affirm the Creator's love, not just for a single faith, but for the whole of the human family. 1) To be human is to be in the presence of the spiritual. 2) We have an ethical obligation to respect the truths discovered by

science; knowing the laws of Nature is critical to our success as stewards of the common good. 3) To be human is to be a member of a single human family. We are all descended from the same ancestors and we are all cousins. 4) As students of Scripture, we have an ethical obligation to respect Scripture but not idolize it; where the voices of violence have found their way into Scripture, we have an ethical obligation to rise above them. 5) As citizens, we have an ethical obligation to support separation of Church and State; to do otherwise is to bring corruption both into the heart of the Church and into the heart of the State.

1. The Presence of the Spiritual

Religious leaders have a very particular way of describing human nature. It is our nature to be sinners, they tell us, and they trace the presence of sin back to a single act of disobedience by the First Man in the first garden. Maybe, I say, but maybe not. Scientists also have a particular way of describing human nature. We are creatures with drives and needs, some inherited from our animal past, some absorbed from the society and culture within which we live. Maybe, I say, but maybe not.

I would like to come at the matter of human nature from a rather different direction. There is a mystery to who we are that eludes our scientists; there is a realism to who we are that doesn't quite fit with the tale of Adam's exile from the garden.

I suggest we begin with the foundational mystery of human life. This is often posed as the "Consciousness" question. Why do we have this quality we experience as consciousness? What's that all about?

It's an important question, yet this framing of it badly misses the central riddle. What is truly mysterious is the fact that we experience sensation of any sort. We take this for granted so naturally that we forget that we have no idea what it is about the building blocks of Nature that create the capacity to experience sensation.

Roll those words on your tongue. "Experience sensation." "Experience sensation." What do I mean by that?

I mean everything. Experience pain. Pleasure. Vanilla. Chocolate. Sadness. Anger. Lust. Hunger. Beauty. Laughter. Whatever it is we can experience, from external stimuli and from internal stimuli, that all belongs to the universe of sensation.

This is not just a human capacity – all creatures within the animal kingdom presumably have similar capacities. Experiencing a sensation is a pre-verbal capability, a capacity that is present in a wide range of life forms. This is where the mystery of life begins, where the touch of the divine is first felt.

We are told, as children, that the human body has five senses – seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching. The outside world provides the stimulus; our senses detect the stimulus.

Let me be clear. The mystery to be explained is not the stimulus itself, but rather the body's capacity to experience the sensation that the stimulus generates. Somehow or another, a living creature is capable, within itself, of generating an "experiencing" of sensation. For this to be true, as we know it is, what else must be true? Isn't it obvious? The atoms and molecules and cells of my body must be capable of generating an "experiencing" state, and adjusting the quality of that state according to the nature of the stimulus.

But where does this capacity come from? Yesterday I ate squash, perhaps, and rice, and chicken, and lettuce, and tomatoes, and a cookie. I drank some water. Today, with this fuel in my system, I sit here at my computer pondering an issue. I experience puzzlement – a sensation. And I reflect that yesterday’s food molecules – mostly hydrocarbons – now contribute to the energy in my body and therefore contribute to the experiencing of sensation. And the experiencing of consciousness.

Does this mean my squash and rice and chicken and lettuce were themselves “conscious” in any meaningful sense of that term? Before I ate them? I doubt it. But once they had been eaten, did they have the capacity to support the experiencing of sensation? Obviously yes.

Everything that I am, today, started out as food, or drink, or air, in the relatively recent past. These resources flow into my body, flow through my body, and flow out again. And during all the time that these flows of food and drink and air are present within me, they support my “experiencing of sensation.”

Let’s turn to love, one of humanity’s most treasured sensations. Without food, without hydrocarbons, without oxygen, the sensation of love would be impossible, would it not? Of course. But do we therefore conclude that the sensation of love consists essentially of hydrogen and carbon and oxygen? Saying that I am capable of “experiencing sensation” merely because I breathe and eat and drink, well, that tells us everything and nothing.

So what is it within the domain of Science that makes this mystery so elusive? Science is, among other things, a collection of disciplines, a collection of occupations, if you will, and as so often happens, each occupation happily plays in its own sandbox. The riddle is elusive, in part, because there is no field or discipline within Science that owns the mission of explaining how it is that raw matter can ever have the capacity to experience sensation.

It certainly isn’t the responsibility of the physicist. Physicists may understand the inner structure of an atom – all the subatomic particles that come together as neutrons and protons and electrons – and they may know something about particle mass and particle energy and particle states. Show me, though, within the physicist’s model of the atom anything that explains my capacity to experience sensation.

Nor does the experiencing of sensation belong within the responsibility domain of the chemist. Chemists are students of molecules – how they come together, how they change shapes, how they break apart, how they absorb and release energy. Does chemistry require a theory about the experiencing of sensation? Well, no. Chemistry doesn’t require such a theory. Should an offbeat chemist aspire to find such a theory, odds are that he or she would fast hit a wall.

Well, if not physicists or chemists, what about biologists? Does a biologist require a working theory about experiencing sensation? Again, the answer is, “Not really.” Biologists can do perfectly well observing species of plants and species of animals and how they grow and feed and reproduce. They can collect and observe and categorize; they can dissect and observe and write observations. All a biologist really needs is a stimulus-response model. If the creature receives Stimulus X, observation tells us that Response Y will follow. One can be a biologist without knowing what it is about the physical properties of atomic particles that make possible the experiencing of sensation inside living organisms.

What about the psychologist? If I work my way up the ladder of science far enough, I arrive

in the psychologist's laboratory. Now I am in the presence of an investigator who assumes the capacity to experience sensation. How loud is a sound? How bright is a light? How tempting is a stimulus? The experiencing of a sensation is simply assumed. It doesn't have to be explained. Its intensity can be measured; that's enough.

My point? At the base of the scientific pyramid, the issue of experiencing sensation is outside the job description; at higher levels of investigation, its reality is already assumed. In between the "Don't Ask" of physicists and chemists and even biologists, and the "Assume," of psychologists and veterinarians, where does the experiencing of sensation get explained? Nowhere. None of the silos of science truly owns this central issue. Why? Because no one knows how it might be measured. With what instrument would an investigator move forward?

Interesting, yes? The capacity to experience sensation is at the heart of life, but it draws no attention from science.

Neuroscience Misses the Music. Neuroscientists might disagree with my thesis. They might claim that their work puts them hot on the trail of consciousness. But I would respond by disagreeing in turn with them. Neuroscientists ask the measurable and researchable question: *Where* in the human brain does consciousness seem to reside? It would be hard to do otherwise, would it not, for those who cannot publish unless they have hard data.

Yet the findings of neuroscience will never resolve the core question – how does the capacity to experience sensation arise in the first place? What is latent, in the food we eat, that makes it possible for atoms and molecules so mundane as hydrogen and carbon and oxygen to experience sensation once they are incorporated into a living organism? Neuroscientists have no answer; it is not even within their domain to frame the question in those terms.

Now for a thought experiment. Imagine aliens from outer space arriving on our planet for a visit. Though advanced in many respects, these aliens have no ears. For some odd reason they never acquired the capacity to hear and experience sound. They communicate by other methods. Even though they are wholly deaf, they do understand that energy waves pass through the air, and as skilled technicians they possess sensors that can detect such energy waves.

Let us imagine further that these charmingly deaf aliens take on the project of analyzing a symphony orchestra. They draw up a plan. They will place sensors throughout the concert hall, and as the orchestra plays, they will gather sound wave measurements in a central computer room. Energy profiles will dance about on their computer screens.

After several rounds of gathering data, these diligent aliens know quite a bit about the orchestra. They have learned how to correlate sound signatures with the instruments that produce them. They can map violin sound energy to the violin section, trumpet sound energy to the trumpet section, and so on.

In other words, these hypothetical aliens can now map the geography of the orchestra, much as today's actual neuroscientists now map the geography of the human brain. Of course, since our alien visitors are wholly deaf, they have no artistic concept of music, no ability to distinguish the compositions of Beethoven and Mussorgsky and Tchaikovsky and Philip Glass. Beethoven may have been deaf, at the end of his life, but in his inner ear he still heard music. These deaf folks from outer space have no concept of music. None.

And such is the predicament of today's neuroscientist. She can ask a subject to imagine a sailboat, or a boa constrictor, or a pair of trumpets, or a crying child. From her prior knowledge, she will guess which parts of the brain will light up as the subject hears each word mentioned. Her guess is often correct. As with our hypothetical aliens, she knows something of the geography of the human brain. But she knows nothing of its music. She cannot explain what it is about yesterday's peas and spinach and chips and beer that creates the capacity, today, to experience sensation.

It is the central mystery of being alive. And its explanation lies beyond the reach of science as we know it.

As practitioners, scientists rely heavily on the reality of this mystery, on the experiencing of sensation, the capacity for consciousness, and the processing of thoughts. Yet as members of a profession, these same scientists have no explanation for how these capacities arise, or even why the latent potential to experience sensation should be present within the universe in any form whatever. Within the thought world of theoreticians no framework exists to explain the capacity of the universe to generate theoreticians.

For me, four corollaries follow from this line of thought. First, a spiritual plane exists in the universe and it underlies the capacity to experience sensation. Second, the capacity to experience sensation is essential to the presence of passion. Third, the capacity for experiencing sensation and generating passion is essential to the evolution of life. And, fourth, that which religion calls sin is better understood as an expression of mis-directed passion.

A Spiritual Plane? Does the universe contain a spiritual plane, essential to its functioning? If so, might its presence have something to do with our capacity to experience sensation? Here is what I imagine.

Let us posit within the universe one or more levels of reality whose presence is undetectable with any human-made sensor. No matter how sophisticated we become, we might never have more than the remotest evidence that such planes of reality exist at all.

Let us hypothesize also that one expression of an invisible reality could be the presence of an "awareness-action fields" involving every single particle of energy. These are not fields in the sense that physicists use, but let us imagine that they exist nonetheless.

To be more specific, within each particle of energy, within each electron or photon or what have you, I imagine an awareness field that expresses itself in states of "knowing," "feeling," and "acting." Now slice a nano-second into as many fragments as you wish. Within the duration of each fragment, any given particle will "know" where it is, in the sense of recognizing the electromagnetic and gravitational fields that constitute its environment as of that instant. Given what the particle "knows," there will be within its awareness field an instantaneous micro-burst of "feeling," of intuition as to what it's supposed to "do," given what it "knows." And then it will "act" accordingly.

In other words, as an inherent attribute of every single particle of energy, I posit the presence of a sub-microscopic "capacity to experience of sensation." Know. Experience Sensation. Act.

Now I build on this. Combine trillions of particles into a single cell. Combine millions or billions or trillions of cells into an entire organism. Under the right circumstances, within the right structure and energy fields, their awareness fields blend together, into a much more complex chorale

of “knowing” and “feeling.” From this blending arises the capacity of an entire organism to experience sensation. The experiencing of sensation, as we know it, is the whole chorale. The larger the chorale, the more complex the music that one can experience.

Let’s say I’m roughly right. Something like an awareness field, present in all energy, blends as a chorale in a living creature into an experiencing of sensation. Different molecular reactions create different energy flows, and shape the chorale into different kinds of experiencing. Shouldn’t we interpret this mechanistically, as an elusive but normal part of the material world?

Possibly, but I see in this something more. I suspect the presence of a spiritual field, as one of the invisible planes of reality that tie the universe together. And I surmise that the “awareness fields” exist because the spiritual plane makes it possible for them to exist. We experience sensation, in other words, because a spiritual plane that permeates the universe makes it all possible.

Sensation, Passion, and Evolution. The second and third corollaries follow from the first.

Passion arises within a living creature only because a capacity for experiencing sensation exists first.

And life evolves, especially animal life, only because a capacity for passion is present. Within the animal kingdom, at least, passion is essential to survival and to the perpetuation of the species. Without an inherent capacity for passion, the spark of life would never catch fire.

Imagine a tiny one-celled creature. If it eats, it thrives. If it doesn’t eat, it starves and dies. Imagine that from its environment our one-celled creature receives a range of cues. Light cues, possibly, or sound cues, or odor cues, or taste cues. Imagine also that its interior state gives it cues – hunger cues in particular. In some very primitive way, might this one-celled creature possess its own capacity to experience sensation? “Sensation of hunger, time for food?” “Sensation of light, food this way?” “Sensation of taste or smell, food over here?” And so on. In a very tiny, primitive way, I think it possible that a capacity for experiencing sensation is present even at very small scales of life. Why? Because life forms at all levels, from the simplest to the most complex, depend on the reliability of their signaling systems. And sooner rather than later, a signaling system cannot do its job unless the organism has a capacity for experiencing sensation and differentiating among sensations.

Now, imagine a somewhat larger creature, an earthworm, say. Innumerable cells, compared with the tiniest of living creatures, with billions or trillions of atoms in each cell. Different parts of the earthworm’s body are specialized at different functions, but when it is hungry, or ready to breed, all these components have to work in concert. How can this happen, unless the earthworm as an overall organism has some capacity for experiencing sensation? At some level, the earthworm has to “know” where it is and what its situation is. It has to “feel” what its situation means. And it has to “act” on what it feels. It has to have a capacity for experiencing sensation – not just a single sensation, but a range of sensations. So that it can act, properly, regardless of the situation it finds itself in.

Now visualize a bird, or anything of similar size. How will the bird know when it is supposed to hunt for food if it has no capacity to experience the sensation of hunger? But the bird does experience sensations, and in fact, among the sensations that shape its being are a series of drives. The drive to eat. The drive to mate. The drive to flee when threatened. The drive to

overcome a rival in the battle for a mate.

Now imagine the contrary. What if the stuff of life had no capacity for passion? Would any of Nature's little critters ever get around to eating? Or fleeing from danger? Or mating? Never. Wouldn't happen. Passion and drives are essential. Nothing in the animal kingdom can survive without the assistance of passion. And without survival, there is no evolution. But if there is to be passion, there has to be a capacity for experiencing sensation. Sensation, passion, survival, evolution – they are all connected.

Passion and the Roots of Sin. Now to the fourth corollary. What we experience as the reality of sin is rooted in the reality of human passion.

Within Christianity sin is often explained as the curse that flows from Adam's disobedience in the Garden of Eden. Some theologians go further. Heaven, they believe, is the realm of perfection, while Earth is the realm of the imperfect and the sinful. To be of the flesh is to be a sinner. It is an odd theology, because logically it implies that the Earth is Satan's creation, not God's.

Sin is a difficult starting point. A better starting point is the story of passion. The Creator blessed the universe with a capacity for experiencing sensation and generating passion, because only with passion could life survive and thrive and evolve. We wouldn't be here as a species without passion as a central element in our makeup.

From this it follows that sin is not the central curse that makes humans less than divine. Sin is the mishandling of passion. Our capacity for passion is rooted in our animal nature, from tens of millions of years of evolution. Our capacity for sensing the will of God is a much more recent development, arising partly from our evolution as humans and arising partly from our evolution as cultural beings. Because we as humans now have a capacity to sense the divine, we have a capacity to recognize that some of our passions pull us in directions we no longer wish to go. We develop virtues, as Aristotle would have said, to rein in our dangerous passions and develop our healthy passions.

The core of this story is nothing if not heartwarming. We have a capacity to know love, to know loyalty, and to experience spiritual insight, only because we have been blessed by Creation. Creation gives us a universe that contains a latent ability to experience sensation. And it gives us, here on Earth, the developed expression of that latent ability, a developed expression that makes it possible for us to become people of faith, if we wish. For me, to imagine a universe without a spiritual plane is to imagine a universe in which life as we know it wouldn't exist.

2. Ethics and Science

Where truths about our world can be known, we are ethically obliged to pay attention to truth. In particular, we are obliged to treat the work of science with respect. Scientists may not understand, yet, just how it is that we as living creatures have a capacity for sensation, but there is much that scientists do understand. They have enough evidence to feel confident in saying our universe came into being 13.7 billion years ago; they have enough evidence to feel confident in saying that our Earth is about 4.5 billion years old. And they have enough evidence to feel comfortable in saying that our species, like all species, descends from a long and complex

evolutionary path. Six million years ago, genetic evidence tells us, modern humans and modern chimpanzees belonged to the same, earlier species. Over the past six million years, that species branched off in one direction into modern humans, with a great many useful leaps in our genetic code; the other branch produced modern chimpanzees, whose genetic code is not nearly so different from that of our common ancestors six million years earlier.

The central ethical point, though, is this. We cannot be stewards of the Earth, we cannot be stewards of the common good, if we pretend that truth is whatever we want it to be, with no reference to evidence that exists independently. To be effective stewards, we must have an ethic of truth that sticks closely to evidence. Only with an ethical concern for evidence-based truths can we hope to understand the complex cause-and-effect linkages of our natural environment. If we do not understand the Earth's complex web of life, modern society's powers of replication can swiftly turn us into thoughtless killers of life.

There are those who fear the truths of science, imagining that science will somehow do away with the presence of the Divine in human culture. This overstates the reach of Science. Science can never know the ultimate source of Creation; heck, as I have just shown, science cannot understand the human capacity to experience sensation. Nor can science understand the presence of love in the human heart. Yes, science may sometimes be at odds with Scripture, because Scripture after all was written by poets. But science is hardly at odds with the Divine. Understanding the Divine will always and forever be well beyond the reach of Science.

Where Science is strong, though, we are ethically bound to listen and pay attention. Scientists won't always be right, but part of the discipline of science is a code of testing, and testing again, and testing still further, till a key issue has been understood from every possible angle. Science can teach us the lessons that we most need to learn – how to temper humanity's sometimes deadly powers of replication – and we cannot in good conscience close our minds to its insights.

3. Affirm the One Human Family

Those who study population genetics now report some fascinating findings.

First of all, they note, not all human DNA gets resorted every time a new child is conceived. If the child is a boy, it will inherit Y chromosome DNA directly from the father. None of the mother's DNA enters into the Y chromosome mix. If the child is a girl, it will inherit mitochondrial DNA directly from the mother. None of the father's DNA enters into the mitochondrial mix.

Second, they tell us, random genetic variation occurs with predictable frequency. The longer the chain of generations, the more variation the genetic code acquires.

Third, they say, these random variations become markers for different tribes. If a son with a random variation leaves the home tribe and migrates to a new part of the world, all his male descendants will carry his new, slightly altered genetic code.

And fourth, this means that the lineage of every human being can be inferred from the specific genetic markers that men carry in the Y chromosome and that women carry in their mitochondrial DNA.

Finally, they say, they see no evidence of two or more completely separate sets of human ancestors. All Y chromosome DNA in modern males points backward through time to a shared

male ancestor. All mitochondrial DNA in modern females points backward through time to a shared female ancestor.

The time scale on which tribal differentiation has occurred is still in some dispute, I gather. Perhaps it was as long as a hundred thousand years; perhaps it has occurred mostly over the last fifty thousand years. At 25 years per generation, we who are alive today represent roughly the two thousandth generation of modern humans.

Biologically, it seems clear, all human beings stem from the same ancestors. We are all descendants of the same human family, stretching back through time for two thousand generations. And, therefore, we are all cousins.

To be human is to live within a culture. To be human and be treated with respect is to live within a culture that affirms the importance of ethics. If our core ethical value holds that all humans are to be treated with respect, then we are obligated to recognize – at some level – the ethical oneness of the entire human family. This is an ethical obligation that bears upon us as members of different religious faiths just as much as it bears on us as members of different nations. One Creator. One Creation. One Earth. One Human Family. There is an ethical truth to this that speaks to all human beings.

4. Approach Scripture Ethically

Now to the point on which some people of faith are most resistant to their ethical responsibilities. The essence of faith, for some, is the assertion that Scripture arrives in our hands today through Divine Agency. We are to revere it, and kneel before it, and worship as it says, because it truly is the Divine Word of God. Or Jahweh. Or Allah.

There are two deep ethical problems with this assertion, and they need to be on the table for our prayerful consideration.

One ethical problem is that we cannot actually know what parts of Scripture – any Scripture – truly represent the wishes of the Creator, and what parts represent only the best guess of their human writers. If I say, “I know that all of Scripture is the Word of God,” how can I possibly know this, unless I too am God? To claim that I have divine knowledge of Scripture’s truth is to put myself on the same plane of God. We have a name for this. We call it blasphemy. If I claim that I am godly enough to know the truth of all Scripture, am I not elevating myself to God’s level and committing blasphemy? Not a good idea, I would say. And it gets worse. If I claim that all of Scripture is God’s True Word, odds are I have made that claim because I want you to fall on your knees and worship this godly thing. In other words, I ask you to practice idolatry. Make of Scripture a golden calf and fall down before it in worship. To assert the literal truth of every word of Scripture is to commit both blasphemy and idolatry. It is a grave ethical error. Only God knows which parts of Scripture are truly His wishes today and which parts are not.

The second ethical problem is that Scripture is a mixed bag of the profound and the hateful. This would seem to be an inherent consequence of the tribal passions that wracked the Earth at the time when Scripture arose. The twelve tribes of Israel imagined that Yahweh was not only their tribal God; Yahweh was also thought to be the creator of the universe. The Christians who gathered around the worship of Jesus and the inspiration of Paul imagined the deep inferiority of non-believers. Followers of Islam were similarly imbued with the spirit of tribal rightness. Biblical

passages frequently invoke a spirit of tribe-on-tribe racism and violence. What was meant by the contempt for “heathens” and “pagans” if not the tribal hatred for those of another tribe who happened to understand the Divine in a somewhat different way? Racism can lead to murder. The books of Joshua and Esther in particular celebrate the mass slaughter of those who were not Hebrews.

To claim the whole of scripture as our own today – any scripture – is a complex matter. Are we to ally with our scriptural ancestors in their racism and hatred for other tribes? Why would we do this? Why would we embrace the abusiveness and the violence of the distant past as our own? What an ethical crime that would be! Ethically, scripture is to be studied, and the parts of Scripture that lift us up are to be revered. But those parts that celebrate tribal prejudice, violence, and murder have nothing in them that we should admire today. We are, we know today, all one human family, and all of us descend from one Creation. It is wrong for cousins to turn against cousins. Where Scripture brings cousins together, it offers us much to love. Where parts of Scripture would drive cousins apart, we should leave those parts behind.

5. Ethics and Church and State

America long ago learned to appreciate the value of honoring religious diversity. Some Americans may have been Protestant, while other Americans may have been Catholic. But Americans together were stronger than Americans divided. Our Constitution specifically excludes the use of a religious test in qualifying people to run for office. (Article VI – “no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States”) The First Amendment to the Bill of Rights prohibits the establishment of religion. England might have made the Church of England the official state church, but that was not to happen in the new American republic. One could attend the church of one’s choice, or no church at all, and still enjoy full rights as an American citizen. Tolerance let America combine religious diversity and civic unity. We were stronger as a people and as a nation for honoring religious freedom.

Failure to provide for separation of church and state lowers ethical standards within the state and promotes its corruption. Zionists in 1896 took as their goal the formation of a Jewish state, and set in motion a chain of events freighted with risk. The notion of a Jewish state inherently implies that Jews in a Jewish state will one day feel themselves compelled to suppress the influence of non-Jews. To embark on that course is to wish upon one’s descendants the corruption of racial prejudice. Any state that declares itself to be Islamic takes on much the same hazard, just as exclusively Christian states so often did within Europe. Once a government defines itself as Christian, as Jewish, as Islamic, or whatever, it carves out a path that leads to tribalism, racism, and oppression. Religious idealists imagine that their state will be purified by its affiliation with religion, but what happens in the real world is quite the opposite. States that define themselves in religious terms end up being corrupted rather than redeemed.

The flip side is just as serious. Religion that is seated at the table of state power also becomes corrupt. A priesthood that becomes part of the state will inevitably be drawn into the corrupting effects of one party rule. Too much money, too many bribes, too many lies, too many crooks to cover for – it is a stew in which no self-respecting religion would ever want to swim.

Separation of church and state is the right answer for the church and the right answer for the

state. States that accept responsibility for treating all faiths fairly are inherently more honest than states which seek to cement their power by suppressing one religious group in order to advantage another. Churches that keep their distance from the money-changing activities of the state will enjoy greater honesty among their leaders and a more genuine spirit of loyalty from their followers.

The rule of law is for everyone; it protects the honesty of the state and it protects the integrity of all churches. And the free choice of worship is for everyone. We are all the Creator's children, and we will love the Creator best when we are free to worship in our own way.

Faith and the Common Good

Because we are creatures of passion, we have the capacity to act in ways that cause great harm. Fortunately we also have higher capacities as well. Because we are creatures of passion we have the capacity to sense a higher purpose for our lives and to give much to our fellow citizens and our whole society.

Faith at its worst helps us go astray. It blesses our violence, and pretends that its blessings come from God.

Faith at its best lifts us above ourselves. Few of us can be people of faith in the abstract; most of us will choose a church and worship the Creator through the ceremonies of the religion that most appeals to us. We like our particularity – our scripture, our hymnal, our clergy, our worship community. There is no reason, in worshiping the Creator according to our different lights, that we cannot honor the oneness of the human family and the Creator's love for everyone. We can give the Creator's love a Hindu accent, or a Muslim accent, or a Jewish accent, or a Protestant Christian accent, or an Orthodox Christian accent, or a Catholic accent – whatever our choice, there is still but one Creation, but one Creator, and but one human family to celebrate.

How might we express this, liturgically, in every house of worship? I suggest the lighting of a single candle, at least once a year, to symbolize the oneness of Creation and the oneness of the human family across all this Earth. Light the candle, and pray for the Creator to bless each of us and all of us.

And this candle doesn't even have to be lit within a conventional church, or synagogue, or mosque, or temple. It can be lit by anyone, in any group, on behalf of the oneness of the human family.

The Creator, as Protestants are likely to remind us, is universal.

The Creator, as Evangelicals and Catholics are likely to remind us, is deeply personal.

The Creator, as Jews and Muslims are likely to remind us, operates within history and asks us to take responsibility for the direction of history.

Whenever any religion asks us to be deaf to non-believers, we should be wary. All our cousins, in all countries, deserve our respect, regardless of their faith. Whenever any religion asks us to feel the Creator's love, for ourselves, and for all the human family, our hearts should leap. Communities of faith have much to offer the common good. We were given passion so that we might seek to be of service.