

**S**ome say that religion is the cause of our worst divisions, and a threat to democracy and civilization. The truth is more broadly and deeply rooted in the human psyche and spirit.

The great religious traditions have survived across millennia because they express insights that human beings have repeatedly found to be true. But they are containers for those insights—fashioned and carried forward by human beings, and therefore prone to every passion and frailty of the human condition. Religions become entangled with human identity, and there is nothing more intimate and volatile than that. Our sacred traditions should help us live more thoughtfully, generously, and hopefully with the tensions of our age. But to grasp that, we must look anew at the very nature of faith.

I reject the kind of sweeping prognostication that has become popular in recent years and fueled fear and paranoia: doomsday scenarios of impeding theocracy, phrases like a “clash of civilizations.” I’m drawn to what I call “the vast middle” between the poles of competing religious certainties that have hijacked our cultural discourse. In the vast middle, faith is as much about questions as it is about answers. It is possible to be a believer and a listener at the same time, to be both fervent and searching, to honor the truth of one’s own convictions and the mystery of the convictions of others. The context of most religious virtue is relationship—practical love in families and communities, and care for the suffering and the stranger beyond the bounds of one’s own identity. These qualities of religion should enlarge, not narrow, our public conversation about all of the important issues before us. They should reframe it.

**I WAS BORN ON THE NIGHT**  
John F. Kennedy was elected president. So I arrived more or less with the '60s, but too late to experience the underlying hope and whimsy of the times. I came of age to the unraveling of dreams. My earliest public memories, the defining public events of my childhood, are of vio-

lence and tragedy attached to admirable faces: John and Robert Kennedy; Martin Luther King, Jr.; young men coming home bloody and broken from Vietnam. I grew up with a strong but deeply conflicted sense of politics as the primary arena of human action—of social power and of human frailty, of light and dark secularized yet of biblical proportions.

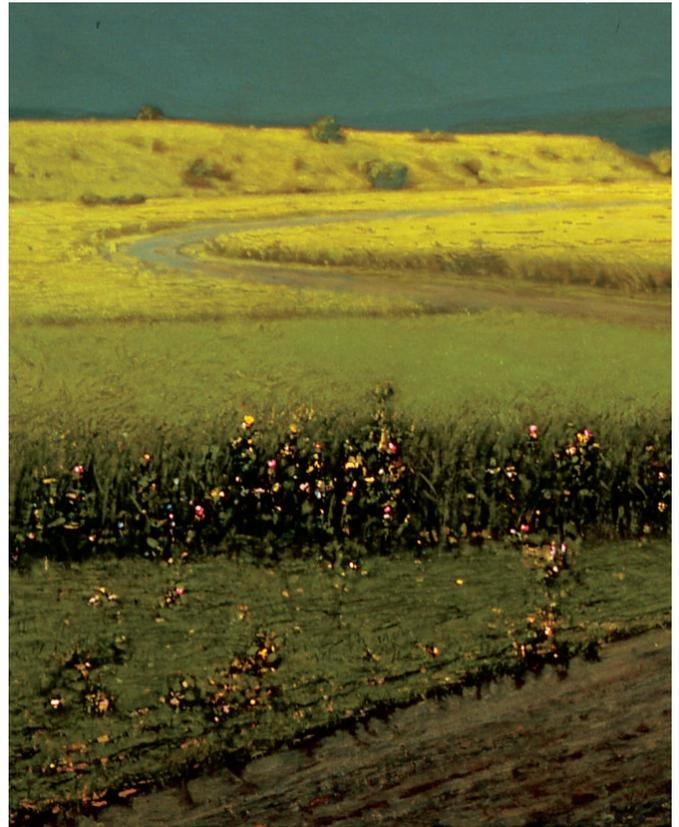
In those years Western intellectuals were foretelling and urging the end of religion. As societies grew more technologically advanced and plural, they argued, religion would simply retreat to the private sphere. Perhaps it would disappear altogether. In 1965 Harvard University’s Harvey Cox published his bestseller *The Secular City* praising the joys of post-religious culture. On April 8, 1966 *Time* magazine asked on its cover, “Is God Dead?”

For decades religion was not treated seriously by those running governments, writing history, driving industry, and defining the issues. Religion, as Boston University sociologist Peter Berger muses, became something “that was done in private between consenting adults.”

**S**piritually, religiously, I was a child of my time. I grew up in Oklahoma, the granddaughter of a Southern Baptist preacher. Through my grandfather I experienced the drama of faith, but my parents had turned their backs on his stern rules for a fallen creation. We went to church on Sunday. Monday through Friday I was raised to win, to perfect myself, and to do so in the American way of accomplishment and accumulation.

I believed then that all of the important and interesting problems in the world were political, and all of the solutions too. And for a while I threw myself body, mind, and spirit at this conviction.

But I changed my mind. There are



places in human experience that politics can not analyze or address, and they are among our raw, essential, heartbreaking, and life-giving realities.

In the early 1990s I studied theology to learn whether I could reconcile religious faith with my intelligence and world experience, and whether faith could illuminate life in all its complexity and passion and frailty. I decided that it can. I have found a vast and vivid landscape of others who share this discovery.

The spiritual energy of our time, as I’ve come to understand it, is not a rejection of the rational disciplines by which we’ve ordered our common life for many decades—law, politics, economics, science. It is, rather, a realization that these disciplines have a limited scope. They can’t ask ultimate questions of morality and meaning. We can construct factual accounts and systems from DNA, gross national product, legal code, but they don’t

*Krista Tippett is the host of American Public Media’s Speaking of Faith. This article is from Speaking of Faith by Krista Tippett, © 2007 by Krista Tippett. Used by permission of Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.*