



begin to tell us how to order our astonishments, what matters in a life, what matters in a death, how to love, how we can be of service to each other. These are the kinds of questions religion arose to address, and religious traditions are keepers of conversation across generations about them.



In this handful of years since I began to think and speak about faith in a new way, the world has realigned itself once again. Religion has moved from the sidelines to the center of world affairs and American life. Western pundits, policymakers, and citizens have awakened collectively to the fact that religion never went away. Indeed, it remains a force that animates lives and nations and history—for better or for worse. Religious identities and spiritually fueled passions are shaping this post-Cold War century as ideologies defined the last. And nothing could be more unrealistic—or more dangerous—than the prescription that reasonable people should abandon religion for its sins. For every shrill and vio-

lent voice that throws itself in front of microphones and cameras in the name of God, there are countless lives of gentleness and good works who will not. We need to see and hear them, as well.

I'VE COME TO UNDERSTAND religious texts and traditions as keepers of truth more openhearted and realistic than many of the arguments against them and the practices in their orbit. We have to think about truth and knowledge itself differently—the insights and edges of words and ideas, the richness of their forms—to understand the nature of religion and the work of theology, the human attempt to pin God, however fleetingly, down to earth. In many ways, religion comes from the same place in us that art comes from. The language of the human heart is poetry. Music is a language of the spirit. The *métier* of religious ideas is parable, verse, and story. All of our names for God are metaphor. Our sacred texts burn with that knowledge and dare us to use all of our faculties of intelligence and experience and creativity. But we forget this: our fact- and argument-obsessed culture is deaf to it, blind to it.

“Our theology,” says British author Karen Armstrong, “should be like poetry.... A poet spends a great deal of time listening to his unconscious, and slowly calling up a poem word by word, phrase by phrase, until something beautiful is brought forth into the world that changes people’s perceptions....” This is why we can’t compare faith flatly to reason and declare it intellectually inferior. Its territory is the drama of human life, where art is more precise than science, where ideas are lived and breathed. Our minds can be engaged in this realm as seriously as in the construction of argument or logic, but in a different way. Life and art both test the limits and landscape of argument and logic. We apprehend religious mystery and truth in words and as often, perhaps, beyond them: in the presence of beauty, in acts of kindness, and in silence. □

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forming, political bedfellows.

What makes the secularly religious so interesting is that, in theory, they can be found in all denominations and all religions. There are even secularly religious evangelicals and Orthodox Jews. Granted, it is much easier to find them in a Unitarian church or in a Reform temple. Still, no religion in America is immune to the presence of individuals who are moderate, self-critical, and open to accommodating the modern world. My hunch: some intelligent Democratic strategist out there has understood that the secularly religious fear *both* the religious right and the secular left. The trick lies in crafting rhetoric and policies that appeal to them.

And so, while conservative Christians have shrewdly (and profitably) made a scapegoat of godless secularism for decades, they have perhaps misunderstood the identity of their most daunting adversary. In terms of competition for hearts and minds, in terms of competition for political influence, the religious moderates and religious defenders of the Establishment Clause, not the village atheists, will give them a run for their money in the coming decades. An alignment of mainline Protestants, liberal Catholics, Jews, Muslims, and members of non-Abrahamic faiths along with stray secularly religious conservative Christians would pose the biggest challenge to nonsecular Bible-carrying Protestants.



The doomsday scenarios of the secular left have yet to come true. The dream of the evangelicals remains unfulfilled, the sheer inertia of the Golden Age of Secularism checking them at every turn. Still, conservative Christians have achieved much and are poised, perhaps, for even greater attainments in the years ahead. They have, after all, succeeded in restoring public prominence of the Bible after its descent into oblivion at mid-century. The increased salience of Scripture in the public square and in national discourse reflects profound electoral, demographic, and cultural shifts that may irrevocably

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