

Religion: Bound by Loving Ties

JEFFREY R. HOLLAND

One of my BYU professors of yesteryear—actually quite a few yesteryears—was Edward L. Hart, who wrote the text of a much-loved hymn in the Church. The second verse of that hymn, *Our Savior's Love*, reads this way:

*The Spirit, voice
Of goodness, whispers to our hearts
A better choice
Than evil's anguished cries.
Loud may the sound
Of hope ring till all doubt departs,
And we are bound
To him by loving ties.*¹

An omnibus word familiar to us all that summarizes these “loving ties” to our Heavenly Father is *religion*. Scholars debate the etymology of that word just as scholars and laymen alike debate almost everything about the subject of religion, but a widely accepted account of its origin suggests that our English word *religion* comes from the Latin word *religare*, meaning “to tie” or, more literally, “to re-tie.”² In that root syllable of *ligare* you can hear the echo of a word such as *ligature*, which is what a doctor uses to sew us up if we have a wound.

So, for our purpose today, religion is that which unites what was separated or holds together that which might be torn apart—an obvious need for us, individually and collectively, given the trials and tribulations we all experience here in mortality.

What is equally obvious is that the great conflict between good and evil, right and wrong, the moral and the immoral—conflict that the world's great faiths and devoted religious believers have historically tried to address—is being intensified in our time and is affecting an ever-wider segment of our culture. And let there be no doubt that the outcome of this conflict truly matters, not only in eternity but in everyday life as well. Will and Ariel Durant put the issue squarely as they reflected on what they called “the lessons of history.” “There is *no* significant example in history,” they said, “of [any] society successfully maintaining moral life without the aid of religion.”³

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If that is true—and surely we feel it is—then we should be genuinely concerned over the assertion that *the single most distinguishing feature of modern life is the rise of secularism* with its attendant dismissal of, cynicism toward, or marked disenchantment with religion.⁴ How wonderfully prophetic our beloved Elder Neal A. Maxwell was—clear back in 1978—when he said in a BYU devotional:

We shall see in our time a maximum . . . effort . . . to establish irreligion as the state religion. [These secularists will use] the carefully preserved . . . freedoms of Western civilization to shrink freedom even as [they reject] the value . . . of our rich Judeo-Christian heritage.

Continuing on, he said:

*Your discipleship may see the time come when religious convictions are heavily discounted. . . . This new irreligious imperialism [will seek] to disallow certain . . . opinions simply because those opinions grow out of religious convictions.*⁵

My goodness! That forecast of turbulent religious weather issued nearly forty years ago is steadily being fulfilled virtually every day somewhere in the world in the minimization of—or open hostility toward—religious practice, religious expression, and, even in some cases, the very idea of religious belief itself. Of course there is often a counterclaim that while some in the contemporary world may be less committed to religion per se, nevertheless many still consider themselves “spiritual.” But, frankly, that palliative may not offer much in terms of collective moral influence in society if “spirituality” means only gazing at the stars or meditating on a mountaintop.

Indeed, many of our ancestors in generations past lived, breathed, walked, and talked in a world full of “spirituality,” but that clearly included concern for the state of one’s soul, an attempt to live a righteous life, some form of

Church attendance, and participation in that congregation’s charitable service in the community. Yes, in more modern times individuals can certainly be “spiritual” in isolation, but we don’t live in isolation. We live as families, friends, neighbors, and nations. That calls for ties that bind us together and bind us to the good. That is what religion does for our society, leading the way for other respected civic and charitable organizations that do the same.

This is not to say that individual faith groups in their many different forms and with their various conflicting beliefs are all true and equally valuable; obviously they cannot be. Nor does it say that institutional religions collectively—churches, if you will—have been an infallible solution to society’s challenges; they clearly have not been. But if we speak of religious faith as among the highest and most noble impulses within us, then to say that so-and-so is a “religious person” or that such and such a family “lives their religion” is intended as a compliment. Such an observation would, as a rule, imply that these people try to be an influence for good, try to live to a higher level of morality than they might otherwise have done, and have tried to help hold the sociopolitical fabric of their community together.

Well, thank heaven for that, because the sociopolitical fabric of a community wears a little thin from time to time—locally, nationally, or internationally—and a glance at the evening news tells us this is one of those times. My concern is that when it comes to binding up that fabric in our day, the ligatures of religion are *not* being looked to in quite the way they once were. My boyhood friend and distinguished legal scholar Elder Bruce C. Hafen framed it even more seriously than that:

Democracy’s core values of civilized religion . . . are now under siege—partly because of violent criminals who claim to have religious motives; partly because the wellsprings of stable social norms once transmitted naturally by religion and marriage-based family

*life are being polluted . . . ; and partly because the advocates of some causes today have marshaled enough political and financial capital to impose by intimidation, rather than by reason, their anti-religion strategy of "might makes right."*⁶

There are many colliding social and cultural forces in our day that contribute to this anti-religious condition, which I am not going to address in these remarks. But I do wish to make the very general observation that part of this shift *away* from respect for traditional religious beliefs—and even the right to express those religious beliefs—has come because of a conspicuous shift *toward* greater and greater preoccupation with the existential circumstances of *this* world and less and less concern for—or even belief in—the circumstances, truths, and requirements of the next.

Call it secularism or modernity or the technological age or existentialism on steroids—whatever you want to call such an approach to life, we *do* know a thing or two about it. Most important, we know that it cannot answer the yearning questions of the soul, nor is it substantial enough to sustain us in times of moral crises.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, formerly Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth for twenty-two years, a man whom I admire very much, has written:

*What the secularists forgot is that Homo sapiens is the meaning-seeking animal. If there is one thing the great institutions of the modern world do not do, it is to provide meaning.*⁷

We are so fortunate—and grateful—that modern technology gives us unprecedented personal freedom, access to virtually unlimited knowledge, and communication capability beyond anything ever known in this world's history, but neither technology nor its worthy parent science can give us much moral

guidance as to how to use that freedom, where to benefit from that knowledge, or what the best purpose of our communication should be. It has been principally the world's great faiths—religion, those ligatures to the Divine we have been speaking of—that do that, that speak to the collective good of society, that offer us a code of conduct and moral compass for living, that help us exult in profound human love, and that strengthen us against profound human loss. If we lose consideration of these deeper elements of our mortal existence—divine elements, if you will—we lose much, some would say most, of that which has value in life.

The legendary German sociologist Max Weber once described such a loss of religious principle in society as being stuck in an "iron cage" of disbelief.⁸ And that was in 1904! Noting even in his day the shift toward a more luxurious but less value-laden society, a society that was giving away its priceless spiritual and religious roots, Weber said in 1918 that "not summer's bloom lies ahead of us, but rather a polar night of icy darkness."⁹

But of course not everyone agrees that religion does or should play such an essential role in civilized society. Recently the gloves have come off in the intellectual street fighting being waged under the banner of the "New Atheists." Figures like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and the late Christopher Hitchens are some of the stars in what is, for me, a dim firmament. These men are as free to express their beliefs—or, in their case, disbeliefs—as any other, but we feel about them what one Oxford don said about a colleague: "On the surface, he's profound, but deep down, he's [pretty] superficial."¹⁰

Rabbi Sacks said that surely it is mind-boggling to think that a group of bright secular thinkers in the twenty-first century really believe that if they can show, for example, "that the universe is more than 6,000 years old" or that a rainbow can be explained other "than as

a sign of God’s covenant after the Flood,” that somehow such stunning assertions will bring all of “humanity’s religious beliefs . . . tumbling down like a house of cards and we would be left with a serene world of rational non-believers,”¹¹—serene except perhaps when they whistle nervously past the local graveyard.

A much harsher assessment of this movement came from theologian David Bentley Hart, who wrote:

*Atheism that consists entirely in vacuous arguments afloat on oceans of historical ignorance, made turbulent by storms of strident self-righteousness, is as contemptible as any other form of dreary fundamentalism.*¹²

We are grateful that a large segment of the human population *does* have some form of religious belief, and in that sense we have not yet seen a “polar night of icy darkness”¹³ envelop us. But no one can say we are not seeing some glaciers on the move.

Charles Taylor, in his book with the descriptive title *A Secular Age*, described the cold dimming of socioreligious light. The shift of our time, he said, has been

*from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is [only] one human possibility among [many] others.*¹⁴

Charles Taylor also wrote that now, in the twenty-first century, “belief in God is no longer axiomatic.”¹⁵ Indeed, in some quarters it is not even a convenient option, it is “an embattled option.”¹⁶

But faith has almost always been “an embattled option” and has almost always been won—and kept—at a price. Indeed, many who have walked away from faith have found the price higher than they intended to pay, such as the man who tore down the fence surrounding his new property only to learn that his next-door

neighbor kept a pack of particularly vicious Rottweilers.

David Brooks hinted at this but put it much too mildly when he wrote in his *New York Times* column, “Take away [the] rich social fabric [that religion has always been,] and what you are left with [are] people who are uncertain about who they really are.”¹⁷ My point about “too mildly” is that a rich social fabric, important as that is, says absolutely nothing about the moral state of one’s soul, redemption from physical death, overcoming spiritual alienation from God, the perpetuation of marriage and the family unit into eternity, and so forth—if anyone is considering such issues in a postmodern world.

In fact, religion has been the principal influence—not the only one, but the principal one—that has kept Western social, political, and cultural life moral, to the extent that these have been moral. And I shudder at how immoral life might have been—then and now—without that influence. Granted, religion has no monopoly on moral action, but centuries of religious belief, including institutional church- or synagogue- or mosque-going, have clearly been preeminent in shaping our notions of right and wrong. Journalist William Saletan put it candidly: “Religion is the vehicle through which most folks learn and practice morality.”¹⁸

I am stressing such points this morning because I have my eye on that future condition about which Elder Maxwell warned—a time when if we are not careful we may find religion at the margins of society rather than at the center of it, when religious beliefs and all the good works those beliefs have generated may be tolerated privately but not admitted or at least certainly not encouraged publicly. The cloud the prophet Elijah saw in the distance no larger than “a man’s hand”¹⁹ is that kind of cloud on the political horizon today. So we speak of it by way of warning, remembering the storm into which Elijah’s small cloud developed.²⁰

But whatever the trouble along the way, I am absolutely certain how this all turns out.

I know the prophecies and the promises given to the faithful, and I know our collective religious heritage—all the Western world’s traditional religious beliefs, varied as they are—is remarkably strong and resilient. The evidence of that religious heritage is all around us, including at great universities, or at least it once was—and fortunately still is at BYU.

Just to remind us how rich the ambiance of religion is in Western culture and because this is Campus Education Week, let me mention just a few of the great religiously influenced non-LDS pieces of literature that I met while pursuing my education on this campus fifty years ago, provincial and dated as my list is. I do so while stressing how barren our lives would be had there not been the freedom for writers, artists, and musicians to embrace and express religious values or discuss religious issues.

I begin by noting the majestic literary—to say nothing of the theological—influence of the King James Bible, what one of the professors I knew later at Yale called “the sublime summit of literature in [the] English [language],”²¹ the greatest single influence on the world’s creative literature for the last 400 years. I think also of what is probably the most widely read piece of English literature other than the Bible: John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*.

Five decades after I first read them, I am still moved by the magnificence of two of the greatest poems ever written by the hand of man: Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy* and John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Certainly the three greatest American novels I read at BYU were Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, and Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—each in its own way a religious text and all more meaningful in my reading of them now than when I was a student on this campus so long ago. So too it is with my encounter with Russian writers, especially Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Leo Tolstoy.

Then—to name only a handful—you add British giants like George Herbert, John Donne,

William Blake, and Robert Browning; throw in Americans like Emily Dickinson, William Faulkner, and Flannery O’Connor; then an American who became British, like T. S. Eliot, and a Briton who became American, like W. H. Auden; and for good luck throw in an Irishman like W. B. Yeats and you have biblical imagery, religious conflict, and wrenching questions of sin, society, and salvation on virtually every page you turn.

Having mentioned a tiny bit of the religiously related literature I happened to encounter as a student, I now note an equally tiny bit of the contribution that religious sensibility has provoked in the heart of the visual artist and the soul of the exultant musician. [An audiovisual presentation was shown.]

Brothers and sisters, my testimony this morning, as one observer recently wrote, is that “over the long haul, religious faith has proven itself *the most powerful and enduring force in human history*.”²² Roman Catholic scholar Robert Royal made the same point, reaffirming that for many, “religion remains deep, widespread, and persistent, to the surprise and irritation of those who claimed to have cast aside [religious] illusion”²³—to those, I might add, who underestimated the indisputable power of faith.

The indisputable power of faith. The most powerful and enduring force in human history. The influence for good in the world. The link between the highest in us and our highest hopes for others. That is why religion matters. Voices of religious faith have elevated our vision, deepened our human conversation, and strengthened both our personal and collective aspirations since time began. How do we even begin to speak of what Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni have given us? Or of what Peter, James, John, the Apostle Paul, Joseph Smith, and Thomas S. Monson mean to us?

It is impossible to calculate the impact that prophets and apostles have had on us, but, putting them in a special category of their own, we

can still consider the world-shaping views and moral force that have come to us from a Martin Luther or a John Calvin or a John Wesley in earlier times, or from a Billy Graham or a Pope Francis or a Dalai Lama in our current age. In this audience today we are partly who we are because some 450 years ago, men like Nicholas Ridley and Hugh Latimer, being burned at the stake in Oxford, called out to one another that they were lighting such a religious fire in England that it would never be put out in all the world. Later William Wilberforce applied just such Christian conviction to abolishing the slave trade in Great Britain. As an ordained minister, Martin Luther King Jr. continued the quest for racial and civil justice through religious eloquence at the pulpit and in the street. George Washington prayed at Valley Forge, and Abraham Lincoln's most cherished volume in his library, which he read regularly, was his Bible—out of which he sought to right a great national wrong and from which, in victory, he called for “malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right.”²⁴

So the core landscape of history has been sketched by the pen and brush and word of those who invoke a Divine Creator's involvement in our lives and who count on the ligatures of religion to bind up our wounds and help us hold things together.

Speaking both literally and figuratively of a recurring feature on that landscape, Will Durant wrote:

*These [church] steeples, everywhere pointing upward, ignoring despair and lifting hope, these lofty city spires, or simple chapels in the hills—they rise at every step from the earth to the sky; in every village of every nation on the globe they challenge doubt and invite weary hearts to consolation. Is it all a vain delusion? Is there nothing beyond life but death, and nothing beyond death but decay? We cannot know. But as long as men suffer these steeples will remain.*²⁵

Of course, those of us who are believers have very specific convictions about what we *can* know regarding the meaning of those ubiquitous church steeples.

In that spirit let me conclude with my heartfelt apostolic witness of truths I do know regarding the ultimate gift true religion provides us. I have been focusing on the social, political, and cultural contributions that religion has provided us for centuries, but I testify that true religion—the gospel of Jesus Christ—gives us infinitely more than that; it gives us “peace in this world, and eternal life in the world to come,”²⁶ as the scripture phrases it.

True religion brings understanding of and loyalty to our Father in Heaven and His uncompromised love for every one of His spirit children—past, present, and future. True religion engenders in us faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and hope in His Resurrection. It encourages love, forbearance, and forgiveness in our interactions with one another, as He so magnanimously demonstrated them in His.

True religion, the tie that binds us to God and to each other, not only seals our family relationships in eternity but also heightens our delight in those family experiences while in mortality. Well beyond all the civic, social, and cultural gifts religion gives us is the mercy of a loving Father and Son who conceived and carried out the atoning mission of that Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, suturing up that which was torn, bonding together that which was broken, healing that which was ill or imperfect, “proclaim[ing] liberty to the captives, and . . . opening . . . the prison to them that are bound.”²⁷

Because my faith, my family, my beliefs, and my covenants—in short, my religion—mean everything to me, I thank my Father in Heaven for religion and pray for the continued privilege to speak of it so long as I shall live. May we think upon the religious heritage that has been handed down to us—at an incalculable price in many instances—and in so remembering not only cherish that heritage more fervently

but live the religious principles we say we want to preserve. Only in the living of our religion will the preservation of it have true meaning. It is in that spirit that we seek the good of our fellow men and women and work toward the earthly kingdom of God rolling forth, so that the heavenly kingdom of God may come.

May our religious privileges be cherished, preserved, and lived, binding us to God and to each other until that blessed millennial day comes, I earnestly pray in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. "Our Savior's Love," *Hymns*, 2002, no. 113.
2. See Latin Dictionary and Grammar Aid, s.v. "relig are" and "lig are," University of Notre Dame, archives.nd.edu/cgi-bin/lookup.pl?stem=relig&ending=are and archives.nd.edu/cgi-bin/lookup.pl?stem=lig&ending=are.
3. Will and Ariel Durant, *The Lessons of History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 51; emphasis added.
4. See George H. Gallup Jr., "Americans' Spiritual Searches Turn Inward," Gallup, 11 February 2003, gallup.com/poll/7759/americans-spiritual-searches-turn-inward.aspx; David Masci and Michael Lipka, "Americans May Be Getting Less Religious, but Feelings of Spirituality Are on the Rise," FactTank: News in the Numbers, Pew Research Center, 21 January 2016, pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/21/americans-spirituality; Michael Lipka, "5 Key Findings About Religiosity in the U.S.—and How It's Changing," FactTank: News in the Numbers, Pew Research Center, 3 November 2015, pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/03/5-key-findings-about-religiosity-in-the-u-s-and-how-its-changing.
5. Neal A. Maxwell, "Meeting the Challenges of Today," BYU devotional address, 10 October 1978.
6. Bruce C. Hafen, "Religious Freedom and the Habits of the Heart," 2015 Oxford University Conference: Magna Carta and Freedom of Religion, 21 June 2015, 10, iclrs.org/content/blurb/files/Elder Bruce Hafen Oxford 2015.pdf.
7. Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (New York: Schocken Books, 2015), 13; also in Jonathan Sacks, "How to Defeat Religious Violence," *Wall Street Journal*, 2 October 2015, wsj.com/articles/how-to-defeat-religious-violence-1443798275.
8. Max Weber, "Asceticism and the Spirit of Capitalism," *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge Classics, 1930, 2005), 123; see "Iron cage," Wikipedia, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iron_cage.
9. Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (London: Routledge, 2009), 128.
10. Quoted in Jonathan Sacks, "Chief Rabbi: Atheism Has Failed. Only Religion Can Defeat the New Barbarians," *The Spectator*, 15 June 2013, spectator.co.uk/2013/06/atheism-has-failed-only-religion-can-fight-the-barbarians.
11. Sacks, "Chief Rabbi."
12. David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2009), 4.
13. Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," 128.
14. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3; emphasis added.
15. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 3.
16. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 3.
17. David Brooks, "How Covenants Make Us," The Opinion Pages, *New York Times*, 5 April 2016, nytimes.com/2016/04/05/opinion/how-covenants-make-us.html?rref=collection/column/david-brooks&action=click&contentCollection=opinion@ion=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=20&pgtype=collection.

18. William Saletan, “When Churches Do the Right Thing,” *Slate* (blog), 8 May 2014, slate.com/blogs/saletan/2014/05/08/is_religion_evil_on_guns_terrorism_and_civil_liberties_these_churches_did.html.

19. 1 Kings 18:44.

20. See 1 Kings 18:44–45.

21. Harold Bloom, *The Shadow of a Great Rock: A Literary Appreciation of the King James Bible* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2011), 1.

22. R. R. Reno, “Religion and Public Life in America in the 21st Century” *Journal of Faith and War*, 30 April 2014, faithandwar.org/index.php/component/content/article/42-god-and-human-

nature/181-religion-and-public-life-in-america-in-the-21st-century; emphasis added.

23. Robert Royal, *The God That Did Not Fail: How Religion Built and Sustains the West* (New York: Encounter Books, 2006), x.

24. Abraham Lincoln, second inaugural address, 4 March 1865.

25. Will Durant, *The Pleasures of Philosophy: A Survey of Human Life and Destiny* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953), 407; see also Will Durant, *Fallen Leaves: Last Words on Life, Love, War, and God* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014), 33.

26. D&C 59:23.

27. Isaiah 61:1.