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### December 7, 2008: The Conclusion of For the Establishment of Religion

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Title: The Conclusion of For the Establishment of Religion

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12/7/2008--I have finished the manuscript of what I hope will become the third book in my trilogy about religion in American life: For the Establishment of Religion. Here is the conclusion:

At the beginning of her classic science fiction novel, *The Dispossessed*, Ursula LeGuin describes a space flight between two worlds that had been cut off from each other. An inhabitant of one world, the physicist Shevek of Anarres, is being transported by a crew from the other world.

In one scene from the flight, Shevek asks the ship's doctor why the Second Officer seems to be afraid of him. The Doctor tells Shevek that the Second Officer is religious and knows that "there's no religion on Anarres."

Shevek replies, "No religion? Are we stones on Anarres?"

The Doctor responds, "I mean established religion—churches, creeds—"

Shevek ponders this and comes to a new conclusion:

I see... . You admit no religion outside the churches, just as you admit no morality outside the laws. ...  
The vocabulary makes it difficult. [T]he word *religion* is...rare. Not often used. ...[Y]ou could not seriously believe that we had no religious capacity? That we could do physics while we were cut off from the profoundest relationship with the cosmos?

Our situation in law has not changed at all from the one LeGuin described over thirty years ago. The vocabulary makes it difficult. This book has argued that the government may not establish religion in the sense of churches and creeds, but must establish the religious capacity, or try to, or at least be allowed to try to, if society is to flourish.

This is not a matter of religion versus secularism. I am a secularist. There are many kinds of secularism. It is a matter instead of being open to the profoundest relationship with the cosmos. The New Atheists and many who favor a strict separation of church and state are not open. They are not open to mystery. They not open to the transcendent. Under their influence, and without a counterbalance in the culture, their narrowness may one day come to dominate our social climate. Then we will be stones indeed.

The United States Supreme Court has a role to play here: positive or negative; opening or closing. At the moment, the Justices seem only to have two modes. On the one hand, separation of church and state in the broad sense of opposition to any public expression that has the smell of religion about it. On the other hand, the conservatives, just waiting for their chance to enthrone the Bible as the winner of a contest to be the dominant public expression.

There need be no winners and losers. Let the Court announce that we share a religious capacity and that government, when it establishes religion, is simply trying to keep that human capacity alive in a world of deadening technology, consumption and entertainment. Even when the government uses traditional religious symbols, language and images, it is still trying to keep open a universal hope. It is not declaring winners and losers. If the Court were to announce this, law would occupy a role it has recently forgotten: peacemaker.

Of course, there will still be those who honestly contest the religious capacity, who dispute openness, who despise mystery. Perhaps they are right. And they will certainly have their say. But they have no right to government neutrality.

We are too used to thinking of established religion as a powerful force. It is not going to be so for very long. We had better begin to prepare for the day that it is not. Secularism may confidently put down its weapons. It is going to win the contest against established religion. But when it does, it is going to have to turn to its vanquished foe for help. When it does so, law should not stand in the way.