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June 20, 2011: What is Religion/What is Prayer?

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Title: What is Religion/What is Prayer?

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6/20/2011—Welcome from Chautauqua, where The Institute on Religion in an Age of Science is holding its annual convention. The topic is good and evil. IRAS is an organization that exists, in a way, to make shambles of the notion of separation of religion from the rest of life, including science. The group seems more to have come from the religion side, rather than the science side, but there is a general commitment to a nonsupernatural comportment and tremendous respect for science in particular. Yet the religious ambiance remains very strong. Every morning we begin with “chapel” led by UU Minister Barbara Jamestone. Every evening we end with a “candlelight service”. I find these services very refreshing and I wonder how strict atheists think we can do without them, or something like them, as a public part of the culture. As the great French atheist writer Andre Comte-Sponville writes in *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality*, funerals provide “a sorely needed ritual—a ceremony... . A human being can’t be buried like an animal or burned like a log.” This leads to the question of prayer on public occasions. Here is a soft melody we sing at chapel every day: “We the heirs of many ages, with the wise to guide our way, honor all earth’s seers and sages, and the science of our day.” Could I begin a high school graduation ceremony with this tune? In chapel, it is called a call and response. That sounds religious. Is the title the important point? Surely the Establishment Clause is more than nominalism.