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April 21, 2013: The Third Church/State Issues Symposium in Philadelphia

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Title: The Third Church/State Issues Symposium in Philadelphia

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4/21/2013 – Yesterday, the Lower Valley Chapter of Americans United for Separation of Church and State held a fabulous church state issues symposium. It was an all day affair with very impressive speakers. The keynote address was given by Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United. He was witty and insightful as always. I will have more to say about the symposium as I think about it but I was particularly taken by the openness of the speakers at the end of the program: Rogers Smith, Thomas Beers and Michael Meyerson. The speakers were wrestling with the potential for common ground between believers and nonbelievers. And the audience, composed remember of people dedicated to the separation of church and state, was very willing to listen and engage. I left the program with much greater hope than I have experienced before. Here is my abstract from the program. As you can see, I was also speaking about common ground: Are We All Really Mostly Religious? Bruce Ledewitz Americans are fighting today over religion. We always have. But today, that fighting contributes to the partisanship and anger, even hatred, in American political life. On one level, we are fighting over government use of religion as a violation of the Establishment Clause and over laws that burden religious belief as a violation of the Free Exercise Clause. But, at a deeper level, we are fighting over religion itself: whether it is good or bad, rational or irrational, reliable or illusion. We are struggling over whether we will be a religious or a secular nation. That fight cannot be settled. It can only be fruitlessly fought. I hope that through my question—*are we all really mostly religious?*—that fight can be transcended. My question is tendentious. As someone who left Judaism, I know that, for many secularists, not being religious is crucial. Similarly, many liberal believers know they are religious, but still want strict separation of church and state and limits on religious exemptions. But if we recognize religion as the matrix from which the questions surrounding the meaning of existence emerge, we will have more empathy for the differing paths that our questioning takes. Our hatreds may lessen. The scope of religion requires that in the context of Free Exercise, practices that are not traditionally religious, must be protected. The Supreme Court has recognized this. But this same broad scope of religion also requires that some forms of religion must be permissible under the Establishment Clause. Once, contesting an anti-abortion law, Ronald Dworkin called the law unconstitutionally religious because the government was claiming that human life is inherently valuable. That is a religious claim. But such a claim embraces almost all of us and cannot be banished from political life.