

Alternate Forms of the Sacred: Family, Sport, Religion

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I know that it dates me to report this – at some point one no longer cares – but I’ve been to more than one Bruce Springsteen concert in my time. More than other bands of my era that I enjoy greatly, Springsteen’s music has always seemed to me to carry a deep resonance with life in North America. As a balladeer of our mainstream culture, his lyrics are as rich and thick as his music is haunting and pulsating. Springsteen is deeply Catholic, working class, and American, and able to reflect on the human condition in incisive yet poignant ways. He narrates human experience so profoundly that it enables the individual listener to transcend the particular details of their personal life and connect to the commonalities of the collective ethos. To attend one of his concerts is in many ways a religious experience, because you cannot in truth merely attend. You participate. And you participate in a worship service of sorts, though it is not a worship of Springsteen himself. He is merely the priest, and at times the prophet. What then exactly is it to which the concert-goer ascribes worth, and worships? What there is sacred?

The sacred is a core component of religion. Social scientists who study the character and components of religion have several ways of defining religion, but let’s draw on only the two simplest types. One type of definition is known as a substantive definition, in that it seeks to identify the substance or essence of religion that sets it apart from non-religion. It assumes that humans everywhere develop systems of meaning they then use to interpret the world. The content that qualifies a meaning system as religion is belief in the supernatural, or the super-empirical, that which is not subject to empirical test. For example, the anthropologist Melford Spiro defines religion as “an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings.” Religious meaning systems have a supernatural referent, and are concerned about uncovering the meaning of life already given to it by that supernatural being or force prior to any person or group discovering it. Humanistic meaning systems, in contrast, do not have a supernatural referent, and are therefore concerned about

making life meaningful by creating meaning. For example, Bertrand Russell said that “I do not think that life in general has any purpose. It just happened. But individual human beings have purposes.” So, religion assumes that our existence has meaning beyond what we choose to give it, meaning supplied by a supernatural.

Substantive definitions have several problems, one of which is that they rule out otherwise acknowledged religions that have no concept of the supernatural, such as some strains of Buddhism. Another problem is that the dichotomy between the natural and the supernatural is itself a product and bias of Western thinking. Religion defined as such is a tidy, traditional, but small box that fails to account adequately for social phenomena that otherwise seem to fall within the realm of the religious.

A second type of definition of religion approaches the question not by seeking to establish what religion is, but what it does. Functional definitions define religion by its consequences, not by the presence of some sense of the supernatural. Something is religion if it functions as religion. So Milton Yinger suggested that it is not the nature of belief or the object of belief that requires our study, but the nature of believing. Central to functional definitions of religion is the concept of the sacred, not the concept of the super-empirical. According to Emile Durkheim, the sacred is that which is set apart from ordinary, mundane, everyday life, that which produces a sense of awe, reverence, and obligation. The sacred is what makes Muslims remove their shoes before entering a mosque, Hindus give cows right of way, and indigenous North Americans avoid disturbing a plot of ground. The counterpoint to the sacred is the profane, the commonplace, utilitarian, everyday aspects of life. Religion is then simply a group of people agreeing on what is sacred and what is profane, and keeping the two realms separate. One problem with the sacred/profane distinction is that it, like the natural/supernatural distinction, is deeply dualistic, and a characteristic of Western thinking. Clearly, not all religion is. Many religious groups maintain that all of life is sacred. For example, Bruderhof communities have de-emphasized ritual and refused to erect church buildings for fear that only certain activities and places will be deemed sacred.

Note that the sacred does not require a super-empirical force, much less a theistic being. Nevertheless, when a super-empirical force or being is postulated, it is almost always deemed sacred. Note also that the sacred is always transcendent, always something more than any one individual can generate. It need not necessarily transcend all of human life and earth in the ultimate, metaphysical, and supernatural sense. It may be only that which transcends the individual and the local, that which takes individuals out of themselves and locates them in some larger social space of meaning and interaction. Note finally that the sacred is socially constructed,

built up by social consensus over time, not handed to humans by a super-empirical entity. Almost anything can be sacralised by society, and there is an astonishing variety of times, spaces, and objects that have been sacralised by one religion or another. In sum, according to functionalist theory, it is the sacred, not the super-empirical, that is the defining feature of religion.

Comparing the two types of definitions of religions introduced here, we see that substantive definitions focus on what religion is, while functional definitions focus on what religion does. Substantive definitions focus on the contents of religion, whereas functional definitions focus on the consequences. Substantive definitions ask if someone is religious, functional definitions ask how someone is religious. Substantive definitions focus on the nature of belief, functional definitions on the nature of believing. Substantive definitions are exclusive, functional definitions are inclusive.

Employing a more inclusive functional definition of religion, and the concept of the sacred at its core, greatly expands the scope of what is considered religious. Clearly, what is held sacred by one group or another applies to much that is beyond the traditional world religions. If religion, as Paul Tillich put it, is anything that asks “existential questions” and addresses “ultimate concerns,” then anything that gives meaning to life, explains life, and organizes life, anything that provides a means to cope and gives hope, becomes an alternate form of the sacred and transcendent. Then it is no longer a question of whether humans are religious, but how they are religious, and what it is that they hold sacred. Then almost any ideological ism is religion, in that every ism holds something to be sacred. Then, as Robert Nelson argues in his recent book *The New Holy Wars*, economism and environmentalism are forms of religion.

Then scientism is also a religion because it is a system of beliefs about the origin of life, beliefs about the utility of scientific endeavours for the ultimate welfare of the world, beliefs about the empirical method of knowing required of all adherents, and a supreme loyalty and commitment of its adherents, even the missionary zeal with which proponents try to win others to share their faith. Then the last writings of George Bernard Shaw are the death-bed despair of a religious zealot: “The science to which I pinned my faith is bankrupt. Its counsels, which should have established the millennium, led instead directly to the suicide of Europe. I believed them once. In their name I helped destroy the faith of millions of worshippers in the temples of a thousand creeds. And now they look at me and witness the great tragedy of an atheist who has lost his faith.” Of course, atheism was never a problem in biblical times; false gods were the problem. Though the first commandment of the Decalogue is to have “no other gods,” it is fallen

human nature to sacralise, to make an idol out of something, anything other than true God. What then are the idols of our time?

Emile Durkheim articulated the classic functional theory of religion in social science in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, at the start of the 20th century. He intentionally studied the most primeval religion he could find, on the assumption that a simple case would reveal the bare essence of religion most clearly, because complex modern religions would cloud that essence. His case study examined the totemism of the Arunta, an aborigine tribe in Australia. A totem is a sacred representation of a species of plant or animal, familiar to us from our West coast totem poles, and totemism is a society where clans are identified by the symbol of a totem. Each clan had its own totem. So for example, if the totem of the Hiebert clan was the koala bear, then all representations of the koala, plus all koalas themselves, plus all members of the Hiebert clan were sacred. The totemic principle was the collective representation of the clan itself. What was sacred was not just the totem itself, but the impersonal, anonymous, amorphous “force” behind the totem. This was not simple idolatry of the totem, nor was there a supernatural force involved, and neither was religion a mere illusion – there was a “greater reality” there that clan members found both exhilarating and comforting. Their experience of it was real, because as the sociological maxim maintains, that which is perceived as real is real in its consequences. The force behind the totem was experienced as something coming from a source greater than the people themselves, outside of themselves, and independent of their will. But the sacred was not marked by any intrinsic features. What marks the sacred is our attitude toward it, and the consequences of that attitude.

Religion thus conceived has social origins. Society is a power that is greater than we are. It transcends us, demands our sacrifices, suppresses our selfish tendencies, and fills us with energy. Society exercises these powers through collective representations. Religion is “eminently collective,” as people come to share common sentiments that Durkheim termed the “collective conscience” which create and reinforce social integration and solidarity. The whole becomes greater than the sum of the individual parts. The totem is the symbol of both the sacred as well as the clan and society at large. In effect, the object of worship is really society itself, and as religion symbolically embodies society, society becomes God, and God becomes society. Religion is society reaffirming and strengthening its idea of itself and its ideal of itself, representing society to itself in the form of tribal unity and a moral code. As such, religion is comprised firstly of beliefs, those representations that express the nature of the sacred. It is comprised secondly of rituals, the repeated symbolic behaviour that retells and enacts beliefs. It is comprised finally of a moral community which gathers periodically to affirm its beliefs, enact its rituals, and bind its members

to the group. Some such gatherings become celebrative experiences of social electricity that Durkheim called “collective effervescence,” those peak occasions of exaltation that generate a contagious emotional enthusiasm which energizes the group. They feel transported for a time to a place where personal woes are of little consequence, and their collective strength is unimpeachable.

And so Durkheim arrives at a functional definition of religion as follows: “religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices – which unite into one single moral community all those who adhere to them.” Swenson’s contemporary definition of religion, offered 100 years later, is remarkably similar: “religion is the individual and social experience of the sacred that is manifested in mythologies, rituals, and ethos, and is integrated into a collective such as a community or an organization.” The sacred is first created and then transmitted through rituals that transform the moral power of society into religious symbols that bind individuals to the group.

Understanding the sacred as a meaning bestowed on various phenomena, not as a meaning inherent in those phenomena, and thus as a human social construction, not a supernaturally given, encourages us to survey social life for examples of what we have made sacred. Christians have applied the concept and status liberally, sacralising most anything they deem of any value. From physical earth to social institution, so many aspects of life are infused with a sense of awe, reverence, and obligation that the Christian hardly knows what to truly set apart and above. In some instances they have done so in concert with broader cultural values, and in other instances society has sacralised particular aspects of life on its own. Three examples serve well, each with different links to Durkheim’s theory, and each with different degrees of Christian complicity, or leadership, depending on one’s view.

The Sacred Family

The first is the family. The human family is sacred to Christians, but is by now at least as sacred to Western culture, if not more so. Secularization, defined as the decline of the sense of the supernatural over the last century or two, has been counterbalanced by sacralisation, the rise in the sense of the sacred. The family is one benefactor of Western culture’s compensatory need to sacralise additional social entities. Social history documents how, beginning in the 19th century and climaxing in the 20th, the family was romanticized first by sentimentalizing it, then by

idealizing it. To sentimentalize something is to one-sidedly accentuate and exaggerate its positive emotions. To idealize something is to one-sidedly accentuate and exaggerate its positive values. To idealize something is to view it as constituting the standard of perfection or excellence, to glorify and exalt it as of greatest worth. The cultural idealization of the family meant that it took on mythic dimensions as the source and center of the good life, the fulfillment of our deepest desires, the realization of an Edenic utopia. Beyond the sentimentalization and idealization of the family was the cultural sacralization of the family that was evident in the family values debates at the end of the 20th century. Family values now value family above all else; nothing is permitted to take priority over it. Today, anyone, but especially Christians, can withdraw from any social commitment with honor, simply by citing a desire to “spend more time with my family,” confident that their motive will be unchallenged and their person admired. Other than the collective representation of a specific plant or animal in the totemism of the Australian Arunta, the clan in Canada today is just as sacred.

But there is a darker undertone of the cultural sacralization of the family. Without discounting the family’s historical, sociological, and theological importance, a growing chorus of both Christian and non-Christian scholars contend that the supreme worth and ultimate significance given to the family in many sectors of the Christian sub-culture today constitutes nothing less than the idolization of the family. The family, in this view, has been sacralized and venerated to where it now invokes the reverence and indeed worship befitting an idol. “The home had never before been sanctified in the way it was in the nineteenth century . . . Home had become a sacramental site, complete with the redemptive qualities previously associated with holy places.” Note that idolatry does not necessarily find security and meaning in graven images of wood or stone, but in something or someone other than God. Idols today are often aspects of social life which are good in themselves, but become evil when cast as the highest good, when we sacrifice for, or to, them other things of equal or greater importance. Our idols tend to be legitimate engagements that we make into false gods, in that, instead of pointing us *to* God, they point to themselves *as* God. Some idols of our time at the popular level include money, sex, and power, and at the cultural level include scientism, technicism, consumerism, and yes, familism.

Janet Fishburn described the idolatry of familism as a domestic folk religion that adapts Christian language and symbols to reinforce cultural commitments to family. Most official world religions develop folk versions that preserve the culture and customs of their social location. These folk versions stand in contrast, and often awkward opposition, to the official version of the faith, which tends to generate a complicated rational systematic theology, a system of ethics based on that theology, a formal cultic ritual, and a professional clergy that elaborates the theology and

ethics in a way that has universal, not just culture-specific, appeal. However, the masses are seldom moved by complicated rationalized theologies, and hence a localized popular version of the meaning system evolves. Whereas the official ecclesiastical version of Christianity has not idolized the family, even while it sacralizes it, the folk version has not been so circumspect.

Fishburn's Christian concern about popular Christian idolatry of family is the negative consequences of what she terms "a severely truncated vision of the nature and mission of the church." Insisting that the church, not the Christian home is the primary source of blessing, she states flatly that "the family is not essential to the Christian life . . . Only the church is essential to the Christian life." Yet if in practice family concerns and commitments do take precedence over all others, then they must by this definition be deemed idolatrous. If they usurp direct allegiance to God and the church, then they cease to be virtuous. The demands of the kingdom are ultimately to pre-empt the demands of family, though not necessarily in every daily situation. Rodney Clapp's emphatic declaration is that "the family is not God's most important institution on earth. The family is not the social agent that most significantly shapes and forms the character of Christians. The family is not the primary vehicle of God's grace and salvation for a waiting, desperate world... The church is."

Sacred Sport

Though social history casts doubt on their claim, Christians like to think that they have led culture in sacralizing the family. Not so with sport. From ancient chariot races to medieval jousting tournaments to colonial ball games to modern athletic spectacles, Christians have first begrudged and resisted the rival popularity of sport, then reluctantly acquiesced to its allures, soon embracing it passionately. As such, they have not so much led the sacralization of sport as become complicit with it, as the shallow contemporary popular theology of sport reveals. But that sport today has been sacralized, and become functionally religious in its own right, there is little doubt. In the sweep of history, sport has secularized from its cultic and ritualistic roots, but in contemporary society, sport has returned to the sacred status and context in which it began. Hockey, it is said with even academic seriousness, has become not just Canada's sport, but Canada's religion. Because Japanese troops in World War II understood baseball to be America's religion and baseball heroes to be American saints, their battle cry intended to demoralize their American foes was "To hell with Babe Ruth!" Charles Prebish asserted that "it is reasonable to consider sport the newest and fastest growing religion, far outdistancing whatever is in second

place.” Avery Brundage, former president of the International Olympic Committee, claimed that the Olympics were “a religion with universal appeal” that “incorporated all the basic values of other religions,” and would “enlighten the world.”

Whether or not sport has become a full-blown alternate religion – and there are good reasons to doubt that it has, such as the absence of an explanation for the origin and purpose of human life – there is little doubt that sport contains many sacred elements, and to witness a Super Bowl, an Olympic Games opening ceremony, or a World Cup final is a transcendent experience. Here is a quick list of similarities of the sacred in religion and sport:

1. They both have saints, exceptional exemplars to be admired and emulated, that have passed on to the great beyond.
2. They both have priests and clergy who shape the values, direct the destinies, and control the emotions of large numbers of people.
3. They both have scribes who faithfully record sacred moments and reproduce sacred texts that point us to ultimate values.
4. They both have congregations of adherents and true believers.
5. They both demand devotion and fidelity to specific beliefs, traditions, and practices.
6. They both have a vocabulary of spiritual concepts such as faith, devotion, worship, dedication, sacrifice, commitment, spirit, prayer, suffering, festival, and celebration.
7. They both entail the repeated symbolic behavior of ritual, the orthopraxy of right practice that at times is more important than the orthodoxy of right belief.
8. They both have places of worship, some more magnificently breath-taking in human architecture than others, some almost pure nature.
9. They both have shrines that preserve sacred symbols and memorabilia, to which believers make a pilgrimage to honor its representations.
10. They both sponsor a variety of holidays and holy days during which celebratory festivals bring the community together and promote involvement.

The sport experience is highly ritualistic, replete with flags, icons, mascots, face-painting and wearing team colors, and chanting, hand-clapping, and lifting arms in exultation. No other form of mass entertainment offers prayers that invoke the blessing of the gods, and sings anthems of tribal identity and loyalty, before bodies are offered as living sacrifices, an early signal that this indeed is more than mere entertainment. For, as Michael Novak put it, “(Devoted) fans are not mere spectators. If they wanted no more than to pass the time, to find diversion, there are cheaper and less internally exhausting ways. Believers in sport do not go to sports to be entertained.... Sports are far more serious than (that), much closer to primal symbols, metaphors,

and acts, much more ancient and frightening. Sports are mysteries of youth and aging, perfect action and decay, fortune and misfortune, strategy and contingency. Sports are rituals... liturgical enactments of... the struggle of the human spirit to prevail."

So it is that sport gives focus and meaning to many daily lives. Even pre-literate toddlers are dressed in team colours to display the identity and loyalty into which they are born. The sport totem grants believers a physical representation of the identity and unity of their clan, embodied in the team mascot, and no matter how far we may move away from the home team as adults, as long as the totem lives, so do we. Family life is now often organized around sport schedules, instead of church activities. As attendance at sporting events has soared in recent decades, attendance at church events has plummeted. Robert Lipsyte observed that while sport has become sacred for the devoted, church religion has become a spectator sport for the disenchanted. It is the sport experience that many now find transformative, a way for players and spectators to escape their humdrum lives and transcend their everyday existence in the community of other true believers. Insidiously, as Daniel Wann and others have observed, sports shaped by the needs of a capitalist system serve vested interests, and become a type of "cultural anesthesia," a form of "spiritual masturbation," or a kind of "opiate" that distracts and diverts attention and energy away from the pressing social problems and issues of the day. Whereas Karl Marx famously declared that in his day religion was the opium of the people, today he would likely name sport, as many others have.

The Sacred Nation

According to James Mathisen, sport, like familism, is best conceived as a folk religion, not official religion, and is one outgrowth of what is known as civil religion. The phrase "civil religion" was coined by Rousseau 250 years ago in *The Social Contract*, a political treatise which inspired the democratic revolutions of Europe. Durkheim's interpretation of religion as an expression of social cohesion extended the concept 150 years later. Civil religion refers to any set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that a) sacralise the existence and values of a people or nation, and b) place the nation in the context of an ultimate meaning system. Here it is the nation that is sacralised, becoming the primary focus of devotion and commitment, its purposes becoming transcendent. In pluralistic societies where no one traditional religion defines the meaningfulness of collective morality and activity, and provides a basis for social cohesion, it is nationalism that can function as religion. Civil religion then becomes normative in the public sphere, while

traditional religion is relegated to the private sphere. For example, in the Roman Empire, everyone had their own gods, but they were nonetheless expected to worship the emperor also. Of course, this makes for logical incoherence and inconsistency, but that has never troubled the practise of folk religion much. Furthermore, priestly forms of civil religion celebrate the greatness of the nation, and provide comfort and stability by legitimating and sacralising its structure and culture. Prophetic forms of civil religion point out how the nation has fallen short of its own ethical ideals, and challenge the status quo, calling the faithful to more virtuous behaviour.

The 20th century offers several instructive examples – the Soviet Union, Iran, Japan, and of course Israel – but perhaps the most striking and consequential is the United States of America. Robert Bellah’s seminal essay, “Civil Religion in America,” made the case most thoroughly, and perhaps most convincingly. He argues that though American civil religion is independent of Christianity, it nevertheless – and understandably, given American history and heritage – adopts the symbolic cadence of Christianity. The conditions for the creation and spread of the “religion of America” were set by the formal separation of church and state in the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States. Like the Romans of old, citizens could worship their god of choice, but Americanism would become a sacred moral force contextualizing them all. Civil religion in America, said Bellah, grew from three historical periods of crisis: the American Revolution, the American civil war, and the role of America in the world at the end of the 20th century. It waned somewhat in the 1970s and 80s, post-Vietnam and post-Watergate, but revived with vigour post-9/11. Throughout its history, the symbolic self-understanding of American society has been that America is a blessed nation with a divine purpose to bring its model of society to the rest of humankind. This is the unquestioned belief that fortifies the will of its people, heals their wounds, and cements the solidarity of an otherwise diverse nation, calling its people to a higher purpose. This is the conviction of manifest destiny that has been used to legitimate its imperialism and its self-proclaimed role as both the conscience of the world, and its international moral watchdog. Civil religion in America is messianic in character, seeing America as a light unto the world, the New Jerusalem, the last best hope of earth.

The sacred imagery of the American ethos is ubiquitous.

1. America was forged by crossing the Atlantic waters to the promised land, where the American Revolution was the final act of the Exodus.
2. George Washington was the Moses who led his people out of bondage, and Thomas Jefferson the principal author of its first sacred text, the Declaration of Independence.

3. Abraham Lincoln was the author of another sacred text, the Gettysburg Address, with its insistent use of new birth images. He was also the martyred saint who gave his life so that the nation might live, and not just America alone, but that the idea and meaning of America would live for the rest of the world.
4. Martin Luther King, Jr. was one of its most charismatic prophets, his "I Have a Dream" speech being a major formulation of American civil religion.
5. This nation of chosen people has its own ceremonial calendar, celebrating itself every Fourth of July, and at every presidential inauguration. Just as Thanksgiving integrates the family into the civil religion, so, too, Memorial Day integrates the local community into the national cult.
6. Its sacred sites include the Washington memorial, Gettysburg, Arlington National Cemetery, the Vietnam War Memorial, and the 9/11 Memorial. I shall never forget how literally awed I was the first time I entered the Lincoln Memorial, the Gettysburg Address carved in stone on one side wall, Lincoln's second inaugural address on the other.
7. The flag is its most sacred and revered symbol, with extensive detailed written rules of etiquette for its handling, not unlike those of the Ark of the Covenant in the book of Exodus.

All these sacred persons, texts, sites, and symbols serve to invoke and renew the moral vision and fervent patriotism of Americans, regardless of their private religious persuasions. Together they "provide religious legitimation to political authority, give the political process a transcendent goal, serve as a carrier of national identity and self-understanding, and provide the point of reference for morally judging the nation." As in other religions, an internal cleavage has arisen, with increasingly polarized conservative and liberal factions vying to have their vision prevail. Conservatives on the right stress the unique and divine nature of America's mandate, and like priests, defend it against detractors and interlopers. Liberals on the left stress sharing their blessings with the rest of the world, and like prophets, admonish Americans for their failure to live up to their egalitarian ideals. The phrase "one nation under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance then becomes either a proclamation of God's blessing or a reminder of God's judgment.

As Bellah concludes, "Civil religion at its best is a genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in or, one could almost say, as revealed through the experience of the American people." They feel a vague sense of this holy hubris in everyday life, and gather periodically to celebrate the American Dream, and the American way of life.

Conclusion

In American folk lore, a train has often signified a collective journey to freedom, a form of liberation, even salvation. This signification was first generated and formed by the underground railway that helped African slaves escape from the American south to the north. And in the lyrics of "The Gospel Train," an African-American spiritual from the 1870s, all are welcome and enabled to ride. "Get on board, little children / Get on board, little children / There's room for many-a-more / The fare is cheap and all can go / The high and poor are there / No second class upon this train / No difference in the fare." But in the lyrics of "This Train is Bound for Glory," a traditional American gospel song from the 1920s, there are restrictions on who is eligible to be a passenger. "This train is bound for glory / Don't carry nothing but the righteous and the holy / This train don't carry no gamblers, / Liars, thieves, nor big shot rambles." Yet in the lyrics of Bruce Springsteen's "Land of Hope and Dreams" from his 2012 album *Wrecking Ball*, the civic creed has shifted from particularity and exclusivity back to universality and inclusivity. "This train carries saints and sinners / This train carries losers and winners / This train carries whores and gamblers / This train carries lost souls / This train, dreams will not be thwarted / This train, faith will be rewarded... / People get ready, you don't need no ticket / You just get on board / You just thank the Lord." With "bells of freedom ringing," the land of hope and dreams transports all the faithful to paradise" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mBzKv8R6Ri8>).

I remember one young man in the row in front of us at a Bruce Springsteen concert. He had come alone to worship with his moral community, and he spent the whole evening literally dancing in the spirit of the occasion, arms uplifted. He knew every word to every song, as did most of the 20,000 followers there, because this was not an evening of spontaneous expression, improvised novelty, or mere celebrity worship. This was liturgy. This was a collective re-presentation of a collective conscience in a moment of collective effervescence. For those few hours of ecstasy, we all knew that we were not alone, that our everyday experience was not idiosyncratic, and that there was a moral force among us larger than any one of us. And when Springsteen sang "Into the Fire," his eulogy to the firefighters of 9/11, that which was held sacred came into sharper relief. Drawing on 1 Corinthians 13, the lyrics gave voice to the vision: "May your strength give us strength / May your faith give us faith / May your hope give us hope / May your love give us love... / Love and duty called you someplace higher, somewhere up the stairs, into the fire." It truly was a sacred moment of transcendence.

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