
SPIRITUAL WISDOM ETHICS: A LINKAGE BETWEEN RELIGION AND GOVERNMENT

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Abstract

This article addresses a new approach to ethics called Spiritual Wisdom Ethics. It relies and builds upon the vast historical and collective values found in the five major religious faiths in our world – Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. However, it does so without the imposition of any particular set of religious beliefs. It represents a global approach to individual and group ethical development based on the concept of virtue ethics developed by Aristotle.

A major test of this faith-based approach to ethics is its compatibility with the fundamental value of American society that is called the separation of church and state. At first consideration, an approach to ethics that is faith based seems incompatible to that value given to Americans by their founding fathers, especially with the application of the regime values of strict separation of church and state that is upheld by the U.S. courts. This article argues otherwise by presenting a brief review of American history regarding this debate and then by summarizing the basic elements of spiritual wisdom ethics. This article argues that spiritual wisdom ethics is consistent with this doctrine. Furthermore, this approach to ethics offers a return to the fundamental perspective on ethics that is consistent with the First Amendment notion of freedom of religion.

Introduction

This article explains a new approach to ethics called Spiritual Wisdom Ethic, which relies and builds upon the vast historical and collective values found in the five major religious faiths in our world

– Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. Without the imposition of any particular set of religious beliefs, it represents a global approach to individual and group ethical development using the concept of virtue ethics developed by Aristotle. This article explains this new approach in the context of the fundamental value of American society called the separation of church and state.

At first consideration, an approach to ethics that is faith based seems incompatible to the separation of church and state but this article argues otherwise by presenting a brief review of American history regarding this debate and then by summarizing the basic elements of spiritual wisdom ethics. This article concludes by arguing that spiritual wisdom ethics is consistent with the First Amendment notion of freedom of religion and that its use would significantly help public servants in their ethical development.

Church and State

Colonial Times

The conflict between the church and state started well before the beginning of America. In fact, the influence of this conflict even induced the birth of the nation. James H. Hutson, in his book about the history of religion in America, writes:

Many of the people who settled British North America in the seventeenth century came for religious reasons, for the opportunity to worship God in ways that were unacceptable in Europe. Their passion for their faith was transmitted to their descendants who created the American nation in 1776 (Hutson, 1998: p. 3).

These settlers fled from a world in which Protestants and Catholics felt that they were the true source of God and therefore others should be “compelled to conform to it, lest, deluded by false doctrine, they lose their souls” (Hutson, 1998: p.3). Sadly enough, this fervor of religious imposition and quest for uniformity in this time usually involved torture, murder, wars, and chaos (Hutson, 1998: p. 3).

The sentiment that grew from this European struggle translated itself into colonial positioning, greater religious freedom,

and the identified need to keep a separation between the church and the state. John Cotton, an early religious leader in the Boston area, made this position clear in addressing “two extremes” that must be avoided:

...that they be not confounded either by giving the spiritual power – which is proper to the church – into the hands of the civil magistrate...or by giving civil power to church-officers who are called to attend only to spiritual matters and the things of God, and therefore may not be distracted from them by secular entanglements (Wilson & Drakeman, 1987: p. 5).

The second distinction maintained by Cotton was that church and state should not be “set in opposition as contraries that one should destroy the other...” but instead they should be as harmonious entities “reaching forth help mutually each to [the] other for the welfare of both according to God” (Wilson & Drakeman, 1987: p. 5).

Another leader, John Winthrop, also tried to “protect the churches by keeping the secular authorities separate from them...” (Wills, 1990: p. 341). One of his opponents, Roger Williams, offered yet another compelling attitude involving church and state relations. Williams, who was subsequently banished from Massachusetts and then founded the State of Rhode Island, was a particular champion of religious freedom. His concept became his legacy and, as noted by Wills, Williams became the “American symbol for tolerance” (Willis, 1990: p. 347).

Interestingly, his tolerance was actually in reaction to intolerance of others because he “felt that most of his neighbors were in some measure compacting with the devil”(Willis, 1990: p. 347). He reasoned that if he were to negatively react to one type of intolerance, then he would also have to react to others he felt were equally deserving of such. It is what Wills describes as his “theological intolerance” that was the key to his political permissiveness (Willis, 1990: p. 347). What is also interesting about Williams is his view of sovereignty, especially how it was not only derived from people, but people who are “darkened in mind and will by sin”(Willis, 1990: p. 348). Williams wrote against persecution and its futility. He reasoned that only God’s punishment of God’s own law was appropriate, and punishment by the people was inappropriate as

was carried out by imperfect people. The State only reserved authority to punish civil infractions (Willis, 1990: p. 350).

To epitomize the influence of Williams, John Clarke, and others, with regard to the early establishment of religious freedom in Rhode Island (sometimes referred to as Rogue Island), wrote:

The process by which those zealous for religion separated it from government presented in microcosm the process that would be worked out in America over the next centuries. The secular state came from the zeal of religion itself. [This was] accomplished ...as the Constitution would later do, by a restriction of the secular power's sphere (Willis, 1990: p. 353).

Constitutional Framing

The religious spirit called for the separation of church and state. Willis points out that "...the actual motive of people in ratifying the First Amendment was closer to the desire to protect the purity of religion than to protect the prerogatives of the state" (Willis, 1990: p. 353). This perspective on why the separation of church and state is important is carried through to our first two presidents -- George Washington and John Adams. Washington "had no reservations about publicly acknowledging the importance of religious faith for the nation's destiny..."(Hutsen, 1998: p. 80). Adams also contributed to the religious "rhetoric", by contending that, "Statesmen...may plan or speculate for Liberty, but it is Religion and Morality alone, which can establish the principles upon which Freedom can securely stand" (Hulsen, 1998: p. 81).

The concept of separation, again, surfaces with Thomas Jefferson, who reportedly wanted freedom of religion so that the country could escape religion. He held that "true religion...would never, because of its own purity, use secular power to coerce belief" (Wills, 1990: p. 369). While he did not subscribe to the mysticism that religion possesses, he did strive to "bring religion into line with reason" (Samuelson, 1997). Jefferson's views about separation are captured in his four arguments posed to Virginian legislation:

1. The state has no right to force religious opinions on the free conscience, which can only submit to evidence.

2. A state religion is not expedient, since it is neither desirable nor attainable.
3. If a state religion were desirable and attainable, there would be no way to ascertain which religion should be imposed.
4. It is advantageous to religion not to impose one set of beliefs (Wills, 1990: p. 368).

James Madison, the fourth president and father of the Constitution, also took a stand on disestablishment. He actually succeeded on the question where Jefferson did not with respect to legislation on this subject. Madison felt that interference of the government into religion was needed for the sake of religion. His Memorial to the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia lists numerous ideas that breathe life into separationism. Those arguments included the limitations of the state to exact jurisdiction over any religious faith, partial establishment opens the door to full establishment, the free exercise of conscience is an equal right to all, and to deny this right would lessen any other (Wilson & Drakeman, 1987; Wills, 1990).

Yet another set of observations from the early 1800s came from Alexis De Tocqueville. He noted on his own arrival in America that “the religious aspect of the country was the first thing that struck my attention (Tocqueville, 1961: p. 365). While he observes European countries having their spirits of religion and freedom marching in different directions, America’s spirits were “intimately united...[and] reigned in common” (Tocqueville, 1961: p.365). In describing the benefits of separation by Tocqueville, Fradkin noted Americans having a “true harmony between Christianity and democracy” because of the established separation between church and state (Fradkin, 2000: p. 90).

Fradkin, in summarizing Tocqueville, lists two benefits regarding separation. First, religious interests are denied access and interests to the “fortunes of particular political forces and parties...” (Fradkin, 2000: p. 90). Because neither had to fear changes to the dynamic of the other, then true respect for liberty was fostered which, in turn, fueled the fire of democracy (Fradkin, 2000: p. 90). Second,

democracy is maintained by “mores of society”, which are built by the “habits of the heart” and opinion (Fradkin, 2000: p. 90). This is where religion exerts its greatest influence upon a democracy, especially in collective habits.

Courts in Defining Separation

The Supreme Court, at the beginning of the Rehnquist era, was expected to review the colossal doctrine that was considered the impregnable wall between church and state (Cord, 1992). Instead, in their review of Lee v. Weisman, the Court maintained the wall of separation that was advocated two hundred years before by Jefferson and others. What became of great interest, as Cord wrote, was while there was disagreement among the justices concerning disposition, there was consensus in that the Constitution required virtually absolute separation (Cord, 1992).

Then Justice Rehnquist called into question the doctrine of separation with his dissenting opinion in the matter of Wallace v. Jaffree (1985). Rehnquist called the Court “to abandon its entire approach to the establishment clause” (Wilson & Drakeman, 1987: p. 240). He reasoned that because of historical misinterpretation, strict governmental *neutrality* is needed to hold the *wall of separation* together. Justice Rehnquist argued:

The Framers intended the Establishment Clause to prohibit the designation of any church as a "national" one. The Clause was also designed to stop the Federal Government from asserting a preference for one religious denomination or sect over others. Given the "incorporation" of the Establishment Clause as against the States via the Fourteenth Amendment in *Everson*, States are prohibited as well from establishing a religion or discriminating between sects. As its history abundantly shows, however, nothing in the Establishment Clause requires government to be strictly neutral between religion and irreligion, nor does that Clause prohibit Congress or the States from pursuing legitimate secular ends through nondiscriminatory sectarian means (Wallace v. Jaffree, 472 U.S. 38, 105 S.Ct. 2479).

Other cases also addressed the question of separation. Cantwell v. Connecticut involved defendants who were deprived of their First Amendment liberty without due process. Everson v. Board of Education dealt with “the practice of reimbursing parents of parochial school children along with the parents of public school children for fares spent to reach their schools” on public transportation (Wilson and Drakeman, 1987: p. 200). These are just some of cases that deal with the issue of separation. The Court upheld separation only through narrow margins.

An Evolution Towards Equal Treatment

The issue of separation evolved into is a debate as to the functionality of strict separation in our current society. The rebuttal to strict separationism is *equal treatment* and it is defined as:

The establishment clause of the First Amendment (*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion*) is not violated, even if government grants aid, recognition, or support to religion or religious groups, as long as government gives equal aid, recognition, or support to *all* religions and parallel or similar secularly based systems of belief and their organized groups (Monsma & Soper, 1998: p. 1).

Instead of upholding the “perhaps impossible to attain” separation currently in place, the equal treatment advocates argue that the establishment clause mandates governmental neutrality. They argue the concept of neutrality calls for equal treatment of all religious groups and faiths and not the strict separation between church and state. Monsma and Soper note that, “the great religious pluralism of today, combined with the rise of secularism as a ‘community of moral conviction,’ pose a new situation that establishment clause interpretations need to take into account” (Monsma & Soper, 1998: p. 4).

This specifically relates to increasing religious pluralism in America, the rise of the comprehensive administrative state, and the continuing widespread dissatisfaction with Supreme Court church-state jurisprudence. While all three feelings are self explanatory, Monsma and Soper assert the increasing number of secular-based organizations as well as the growing administrative state are

providing similar and parallel activities that benefit certain social malaise in our country, which fosters homelessness, starvation, and drug dependency. As a result of such, the separationism principle may not attain true governmental *neutrality* as opposed to an approach "...rooted in equal treatment..." (Monsma & Soper, 1998: p. 5). In addition, the ambiguity of the law, as addressed by the Supreme Court and Congress, lends to the current separationism approach while other issues within both branches are relying on more "equal treatment" rationales in the way law is interpreted and constructed.

Many authors concede that equal treatment is the appropriate solution to catering the establishment clause to our current American society. Michael W. McConnell argued that strict separation "discriminates against religion" (McConnell, 1995: p. 30). James W. Skillen concurs with equal treatment and fuller religious freedom, but only through pluralistic thought as opposed to modern liberal thinking (Skillen, 1998: p. 55). While set in a specific context, Charles Glenn submits that equal treatment and the worldview of religion would allow for more "honest discussion of the important role of religion in American history and culture" (Glenn, 1998: p. 75). In contrast, Robert Destro (1998) argues that nonprofit organizations would not, according to judicial separationists, be allowed to solicit governmental contracts if they maintain their religious personalities. Equal treatment would allow for nonprofit organizations affiliated with a faith to *equally* pursue such.

Not all scholars agree. Derek Davis while stressing the importance of equality in America, does not find the Framers intended equality to apply to the concept of religion. Instead, he notes they [the Framers] recognized "the special place of religion in our lives, provided both special protection for religion and important limitations on government support of religion" (Davis, 1998: p. 157). He argues this is necessary to protect the "private expression of religion in private spheres" (Davis, 1998: p. 157).

In summary, whether the Supreme Court upholds separationism or replaces it with equal treatment is an open question. The arguments for both are compelling. Monsma and Soper contend that the current interpretation acts as a "constraint" and that the only true goal of such dialogue should be "greater religious freedom" (Monsma & Soper, 1998: p. 211).

To summarize what this examination has presented, thus far, are the possible policy positions on the relationship of religion and government. What is clear from early American history is that religion did and was meant to influence government. It was the *habits of the heart* that Tocqueville asserts made American democracy (*and government*) a successful one. It was that passion that brought early European settlers across the Atlantic Ocean in search of an existence that allowed them religious freedom. The Framers maintained the sanctity of religion by prohibiting government from “establishing articles of faith or a mode of worship, or prohibiting the free exercise of religion...” (Wilson & Drakeman, 1987: p. 78). Because of the special relationship one shares within their own faith, the Courts, until recently, have maintained the “strict wall of separation” advocated earlier by Thomas Jefferson by virtually disallowing any governmental dealings in relation to religion.

Now, this article’s purpose shifts from looking at historical views on this subject as well as judicial precedent and to place both on them into the context of *Spiritual Wisdom Ethics*. Like the authors above who argue for *equal treatment*, spiritual wisdom ethics finds itself in an equally progressive position in its relation to public service ethics.

Spiritual Wisdom Ethics

Definition

As noted by scholars prior to the beginning of the 21st Century, society shifted from an industrial focus into one that revolved around the exchange of information. Scholars, such as Peter Drucker (1992), Robert Reich (1992), Lynch and Lynch (1997), noted that as a result of this emerging changes in society that organizations are shifting from traditional hierarchical structures to ones that are far more flat and level. In some cases, the changes are transforming one organization into many smaller, informal groups.

With this shift, there is need for a greater and more profound ethical base for society, which is more *global* rather than *national* in focus. With the influx of greater autonomy and personal flexibility brought on by the new information-era change in organizational structure, a lack or even a maintenance of our current ethical level

could prove disastrous, especially since most public servants face a tremendous amount of temptation in current organizational settings (Theobald, 1997). Furthermore, global perspectives across the board require global considerations in every aspect of performing public service. Ethics bears no exception. Philosophical and ethical theory must be based on fundamental principles that can find “universal approval”(Garafalo and Gueras, 1999).

The actual theory behind spiritual wisdom ethics, as explained by the Lynches, is a reliance on common spiritual wisdom that the five largest faiths, which includes Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, share. This approach offers a *global* outlook on ethics while simultaneously providing a deeply rooted, faith-based perspective regarding morals irrespective of a certain person’s faith. While this approach to ethics itself is relatively new, many of its tenants are consistent with numerous scholarly works regarding public administration (Bailey, 1965; Cooper, 1987; Denhardt, 1991, Luke, 1994; Greenleaf, 1994).

This approach focuses on the internal person, who is the individual source of understanding right and wrong, as the wisdom must come from within. This corresponds to what the various faiths call “a person’s *light*,” and therefore, it is not subject to judgment. From this light, these five faiths assert that one’s *journey* exists through increasing the SELF, which requires “sincere daily action” (Lynch & Lynch, 1998). The type of action begins by developing a love for SELF and then extends to all others. The elements of sacrifice, generosity, selflessness, and compassion characterize this love. Additionally, accompanying the concept of love is a higher respect for one another as articulated in the Golden Rule. Luke, Peck and Havinghurst (1960), Carter (1998), Gawthrop (1989), and Greenleaf (1998) articulate the importance of this type of love for others, which should exist in the work environment.

A second predominate element to spiritual wisdom ethics is set in humility. To accomplish this there must be a greater sensitivity of one’s own limitations but in the context of an overall focus on personal edification. While the faiths vigorously purport the need for humility to know one’s SELF (Bhagavad-Gita 3:35; Dhammapada 18:18; Matthew 7:2-5; Galatians 6:22); The Book of Five Rings (Mushasi) and Tao Te Ching (Lao Tzu)), we must value humility in one’s progression through life.

Another tenet, self-control, is traditionally seen as a common topic among religious dialogue. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the faith traditions, again, come together in their own unique ways, to promote self-control. However, the need for self-control becomes a practical discussion for the purposes of improving the ethical background of public servants. The Lynch and Lynch summarize this as a need to abandon the material focuses so prevalent in some views of life so that one can approach life with innocence and integrity (Lynch and Lynch, 1998). If the distractions of excessive money, prestige, and other *earthly* items are eliminated, then all that is left for the public servant to focus and concern himself with is what Schactel calls an *allocentric* perception or the “broad concern of the good of people we have never met” (Schactel, 1959: p. 409). Self-control, in this approach, is the largest obstacle standing in the way of enlightenment. The distractions of the material world take the public servant away from moving forward spiritually and ultimately from being free. Freedom fosters spiritual growth with clarity (Lynch and Lynch, 1998: p. 293).

Finally, and obviously, all of the faiths call for a love of God. The critical link is not imposition of a stated fact, but a call to a more ethical lifestyle of loving one another, constantly making ourselves aware of our own limitations, self-control, and communication with one’s God. Thus, a *love of God* and the tenets listed above are essentially one in the same.

Perhaps, one of the more compelling strengths of this approach to ethics is the immense moral justification that it would encompass globally. This justification is not only present in the review of this approach, but also in over two hundred years of American history and case law listed earlier. The consequence of applying such an approach to ethics would include improving the quality of organizational structure and climate. Robert Greenleaf offers testimony toward this hypothesis using the following words:

...the strongest, most productive institution over a long period of time is one in which, other things being equal, there is the largest amount of voluntary action in support of the goals of the institution. The people who staff the institution do the right things at the right time ...things that optimize total effectiveness...because the

goals are clear and comprehensive and they understand what *ought* to be done. They believe they are the right things to do, and they take the necessary actions without being instructed (Greenleaf, 1998: p. 51).

People are the focus of the Greenleaf statement. What becomes plainly clear is that individual development is the key to improving the genuine, overall concern to do the right thing, voluntary and selflessly. From the standpoint of Japanese culture, the motivations for an organization to become or remain useful and meaningful are “inextricably bound up with religious dimension” (Iwao Taka, 1994). In hand with this are *religious dimensions* and the developing of such that, as argued above, begins with the individual.

Place in Public Administration

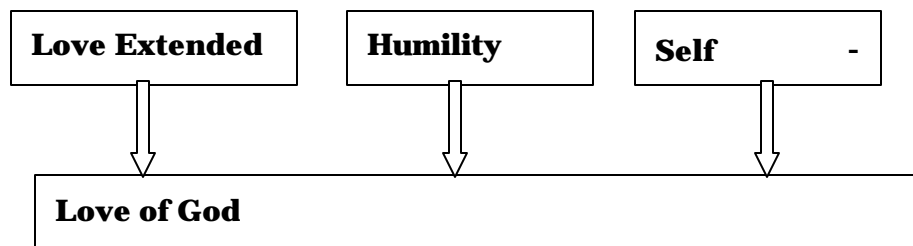
Perhaps the greatest confusion within this discussion pertains to definition. First, the Courts clearly say that there shall be no entanglement between the government and religion. However, is calling for *separation* really calling for a separation of our own moral dimensions and government activity? Louis Gawthrop states this dilemma best. Today’s public administration focus on ethics is only legal interpretations. As a result, he argues that the “moral essence” found in ethical behavior is more separated. (Gawthrop, 1989).

Perhaps, the Framers of the Constitution and the Courts are merely saying is that there is a need for external separation (*legal*) and a lack of entanglement between church and state. To insinuate that public servants must part with their own moral dimensions before they can ever perform the tasks at hand of providing better public service is implausible and senseless. Spiritual wisdom ethics is not, in any way, bound, to any one facet of a person’s life, much like religion itself does not limit its influence to behavior on Sundays. Enlightenment, as argued, not only through scholarly work, but also over two millenniums and five major faiths, is all encompassing, just as the deity who serves as the focal point for that respective faith. However, the reference to religion or any particular faith from the public sector is, arguably, impermissible from the standpoint of jurisprudence and constitutional interpretation.

However, what this approach to spiritual wisdom ethics does is circumnavigate the legal or external *wall of separation*, and reel us

back to the true *essence* of ethics. *Figure 1* shows how the three major tenets of spiritual wisdom ethics essentially define, together, a *love of God*. However, the focal point must remain not in the joint view of religions toward how we demonstrate our love for our understanding of God, but rather on our emphasis of values, regardless of which faith we embrace, which defines our meaning of right and proper actions in life. What public agency would not embrace a team of people who exhibit respect and concern for others, humility coupled with a desire to understand and continually improve them, and self-control that shuns material temptation for more innocent and genuine aspirations? This approach to ethics stresses respect, humility, and self-control and makes them among the paramount virtues, which are meant to guide and define a person as they engage in life.

Figure One: Primary Tenets of *Spiritual Wisdom Ethics*



This emphasis on virtue ethics and this particular set of virtues does create a consistency between Spiritual Wisdom Ethics and the concerns of the Framers. These virtues are consistent with – *religious freedom* because neither Spiritual Wisdom Ethics nor the concerns of Founders focused on the “private expression of religion.” Instead, these virtues built upon values that are influenced by religion and which give those values unique strength and motivational force. It is, perhaps, through the exclusive focus on *values* and not institutions of faith that spiritual wisdom ethics may be the link to finding the harmony between church and state that John Cotton was calling for so many years ago.

Equal treatment advocates of separation of church and state could argue that their approach to Constitutional interpretation affords even greater cohesion with spiritual wisdom ethics. First, their views would actually cause confusion at best given the large number of faiths in the United States. Interestingly, if separation

were replaced by equal treatment, then love of God would turn to love of **All** Gods, as the various religions have different understandings of God. This, in turn, would take away the focus on virtues based on values that have a deeply rooted moral justification. In its place would be a dialogue on the consideration of **every** varying religious institution. Secondly, a particular set of equal treatment advocates can use this doctrine to place their religious beliefs ahead of others and easily use public policy to establish their understanding of God as public policy. Inherently, this is contrary to the First Amendment in that the state is not to establish a church and entangling government with a religious faith. Thus, the equal treatment approach to Constitutional interpretation is fraught with danger because it is essentially contrary to the Constitutional doctrine of church and state separation and spiritual wisdom ethics.

Conclusions

Logically, spiritual wisdom ethics is consistent with the concept of religious freedom and the noble concept of providing service to the public. It invites a broad, *global* perspective on ethics. Gawthrop (1989) noted that the richness of democracy's quantitative diversity is only as deep as the qualitative depth of "moral unity" (Gawthrop, 1989). In understanding spiritual wisdom ethics, we must look to the common values articulated in humanity's religions. An examination of the quantitative diversity of those faith traditions helps us reveal the common qualitative sense of our moral unity that can and should exist in our global society. This common core values permits us to articulate a set of virtue ethics that can guide those in the public service regardless of their culture and place in the world.

From the standpoint of applying spiritual wisdom ethics, the approach is equally simple and effective. The first step for the public servant is to turn inward. Self-reflection is needed to understand the importance of a love for SELF and then extend that love to all others. The elements of sacrifice, generosity, selflessness, and compassion characterize this love and not ego. The second step is to achieve humility, which encompasses sensitivity for one's own limitations but always in the larger context of personal edification.

The third step is self-control, which is used to abandon the material focuses so prevalent in some views of life so that one can approach life with innocence and integrity. If the public servant

eliminates the distractions of excessive money, prestige, and other *earthly* items, then that person is left to focus on the broad concern of the good of people. In spiritual wisdom ethics, self-control is the largest obstacle standing in the way of enlightenment. The distractions of the material world take the public servant away from moving forward spiritually and ultimately becoming free to make choices not determined by the preprogramming of desire, history, and genetics.

The final step is to close the circle by loving God. Thus, the public servant takes this critical step by changing his or her ethical lifestyle to one of loving one another, constantly being aware of his or her own limitations, exercising self-control, and finally realizing that by doing so that he or she is communicating love to God. Thus, a *love of God* and the tenets listed above are essentially one in the same.

While the debate as to how *church* and *state* interact continues, public administration has a more definitive path to review and ponder as it continues its progress toward its ethical development. There must be an understanding that the path to greater use of ethics in public administration is laced with the rich and temporally sustained values derived from thousands of years of religious wisdom and faith. This is not an argument for one religion, nor is it even a call to express your religious beliefs in any certain way. Such belief is and will always remain best left for private expression and internal contemplation. What this approach to ethics calls for is that we, as individuals and public servants, not ignore what is painfully obvious and at our disposal – the values promulgated in spiritual wisdom and identified uniquely in each and every person. Where we define right from wrong, as we must as public servants, we can manifest our virtue learned from the total spiritual wisdom of human existence and that manifestation is our statement of love of God regardless of our faith tradition.

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