

RUNCIE LECTURE

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God, Goodness and Contemporary Society

The Rt. Rev'd Prof. Lord Harries

First, I would like to thank you for the honour of inviting me to deliver this lecture. I am delighted to be with you, and I would like to thank John and Linda Morgan for welcoming me so warmly and graciously. Secondly, it is a particular personal pleasure to be asked to give a lecture named after Robert Runcie. I was one of his first students at Cuddesdon College in 1961. He consecrated me as Bishop of Oxford in 1987, and I count him quite simply as a very great human being, with an unrivalled capacity for *sympatica*, that is, the ability immediately to enter sympathetically into the life of the person he was talking to, from whatever background they came.

As you know, one of the distinguishing features of the new atheism, in contrast to most atheism of the past, is that it does not just argue that religious claims are untrue, but that religion is essentially immoral. For Christopher Hitchens religion was a poison that had to be drained from the body of society. Such atheists have claimed not just the high intellectual ground but the high moral ground as well. In reaction to this many religious believers have tended to argue that without religious belief there is no foundation for our moral claims and that they dissolve into merely personal preferences. Only on the basis of a belief in God, it is claimed, can there be any true morality. I believe that this polarisation on the issue of religion and morality is untrue, unhealthy and damaging to our society. To indicate a better way forward I am going to begin by discussing the latest book by the distinguished Harvard Professor, Ronald Dworkin, Justice for Hedgehogs.

In this book Dworkin argues that ethics and morality constitute a realm of discourse in its own right, one that can neither be undermined by science nor supported by metaphysics. Furthermore moral issues are always open to rational

argument with a view to arriving at the real truth of the matter. He is therefore conscious of taking up a position contrary to that of most of his colleagues, for he argues against all forms of total scepticism in ethics and morality.

Ethical values are not derived from either science and therefore cannot be undermined by any scientific findings. Similarly, they cannot be based on a religious belief. To put it in religious terms, the question as to whether there is a metaphysical reality to which the name God applies has no bearing on whether one's ethical ideal and set of moral values that flow from it has a firm foundation. Belief in such a God does not substantiate the ethical realm, and disbelief does not undermine it. The realm of value exists in its own right.

The justification for this position, according to Dworkin, is that when we are asked questions about what is right or wrong, the answer will always take the form of moral reasoning. Any attempt to go outside this by appeals to scientific findings or religious beliefs, fails to answer the question. This suggests that all argument about ethics and morality is in the end circular, a conclusion he fully accepts. It is circular because whatever we say outside that circle, about science or metaphysics, is a different realm of discourse. That is why he also rejects meta-ethics, because that very concept assumes there is a position beyond ethics itself which can justify the ethical endeavour and it is just this which he rejects. To think and live ethically is to be engaged in moral reasoning and it is just that, moral reasoning, and not something else. As Dworkin puts it

We are always guilty of a kind of circularity. There is no way I can test the accuracy of my moral convictions except by deploying further moral convictions. My reasons for thinking that tax cheating is wrong are good reasons if the arguments I rely on are good ones. If I am faced with someone who holds moral opinions radically different from my own, I cannot count on finding anything in my set of reasons or arguments that he would be irrational not to accept. I cannot *demonstrate* to him that my opinions are true and his false.¹

¹ Ronald Dworkin, Justice for Hedgehogs, Harvard, 2011, p100

Dworkin uses the phrase “value holism” about his position, because fundamental to it is the view that one’s ethical ideal, which he calls ethics, and how one treats others, which expresses it and which he calls morality, need to be consistent with the judgements we make in political philosophy, law and all other areas of human endeavour. Concepts like dignity, equality, liberty, and democracy hang together in a consistent whole and reinforce one another. Again, this is an unfashionable view, going as it does against the position that one value is often incommensurable with another, and there is no unifying whole in which they can be seen. So Dworkin writes of value holism that it is the hedgehog’s faith, which is the faith:

That all true values form an interlocking network, that each of our convictions about what is good or right or beautiful plays some role in supporting each of our other convictions in each of those domains of value. We can seek truth in morality only by pursuing coherence endorsed by conviction. ²

He calls his book Justice for hedgehogs after the ancient Greek distinction, made famous in modern times by Isaiah Berlin, that the fox knows many things, and the hedgehog one big thing. The big thing for Dworkin is the value holism I have described.

What is one to make of this from the standpoint of Christian theology? I believe we should welcome it. Obviously his position raises the old question of Euthyphro’s dilemma, about which Dworkin seems somewhat scornful, but which remains a relevant question for a believer. As originally posed it was formulated

Is what is pious loved by God because it is pious or is it pious because it is loved by God? ³

In its later Christian formulation it can be put in the form

² *ibid.* p.120

³ Plato, The Last Days of Socrates, Penguin, 1987,

Is what is good, good because God wills it, or does God will it because it is good?

If we are to align Dworkin on one side of this old debate, obviously he would be on the latter side. There is a realm of moral discourse that exists in its own right. So, I would argue, believers ought to be on that side as well, as many, though not all, have been. For unless I have some prior understand of what is good we have no way of coming to recognise that God is good, all good, our true and everlasting good. It is usually assumed that the Bible takes for granted a Divine Command theory, and that it therefore takes the former pole of the dilemma, that God's will is prior, but this is not wholly true as even a cursory examination of the psalms shows. For sentences like "Taste and see that the Lord is good"; "Shall not the judge of the earth do justly?" and "Has God forgotten to be gracious" to mention just a few, all assume a standard of goodness and justice to which appeal can be made even before God.⁴ The trouble is that this seems to assume that there is some independent standard of judgement about what is good, to which even God himself is subject and this seems to undermine all that believers have traditionally thought about what it means for God to be God. That is one horn of what seems to be a dilemma. But it is a real dilemma? I will suggest that it is not.

Given this starting point, that we cannot judge God to be good without some prior notion of the good, the position of Dworkin about ethics and morality providing an independent realm of discourse can, I suggest, be fully affirmed. But this does not undermine what it means for God to be God. For a fundamental part of what it means to be made in the image of God is that we have a capacity for moral discernment simply by virtue of being human, whatever religious faith we may or may not have. It belongs to our humanity as such, as considered from a theological point of view. This position was traditionally expressed in the doctrine of natural law, and although as once formulated this is no longer

⁴ Jaco Gericke, "Beyond Divine Command Theory: Moral Realism in the Hebrew Bible" in God, Goodness and Philosophy, ed. Harriet A. Harris, Ashgate, 2011, chap 4

persuasive, it does continue to express a fundamental truth, namely that simply by virtue of being human we have some capacity for moral discernment. This view, far from undermining faith in God, in fact endorses and celebrates the One who gives us such a god-like capacity; indeed a God of such humility that he gives us the ability to make moral judgements even about that reality in which all goodness is rooted.

Dworkin believes that as the Galilean revolution set science free of metaphysics to pursue truth by its own methods, now moral reasoning needs to be set free from the assumptions of science in order to pursue truth in its own appropriate way. He believes that what has bedevilled philosophy and ethics in recent decades has been the assumption that they have to work with the same assumptions as scientists. He rejects this and says that the appropriate method is interpretation. In several complex chapters he considers different kinds of interpretation and the difficulties they face and comes to argue for what he calls conceptual interpretation. This is because the most abstract concepts we use, “thin” concepts in the terminology of Bernard Williams, like justice, goodness, obligation and truth, are themselves interpretations rooted in a set of practises. At this point he once again takes the opportunity to refute total relativism, arguing that whilst practises between different cultures may vary somewhat it is possible to find some common understanding of the concepts in the light of which, for example, the treatment of women, can be judged just or unjust. But the point is that abstract concepts, as well as their more specific expression in “thick” judgements such as, “treating women unequally is wrong” in addition to their actual outworking of in moral and legal codes, is a matter of interpretation, rooted in a set of practices. As he puts it, interpretation goes all the way down. There is no Archimedean point outside the necessity of interpretation in the light of which all can be seen and judged; no hierarchy of values before which all can be ordered. All needs to be seen together as a mutually dependent and supportive whole. This whole is the realm of values and moral reasoning.

So my first point is that there is common ground between the religious believer and the secular thinker. This common ground is the moral realm whose currency is moral reasoning.

I do not believe that moral arguments for the existence of God are logically persuasive, any more than Dworkin does. Nevertheless, I think there is that about Dworkin's position that is open to, perhaps even cries out, for a theological interpretation. I focus first of all on his view that in answer to the question of why it might be right to pursue some particular course of action, all one can do is give moral reasons. Then, if those reasons are questioned, to give further ones. There is no way out of the circle of moral reasoning anymore than in science there is any way out of the circle of scientific reasoning. However, when does the reasoning stop? When one develops a "conviction", to use Dworkin's own word. Discussing an example of philosophers arguing over whether utilitarianism can or cannot provide an all encompassing principle to guide moral decision making, Dworkin says we can never simply stop and say, "Well, the principle just happens, as a matter of fact to be true." We should always be prepared to go on giving other moral reasons for our convictions, even at the most general level of theory. As he puts it:

Philosophers' habit of claiming "intuitions" might mislead us. In its innocent use, the claim is only a statement of conviction. It might also suggest an inability to provide a further reason for that conviction. But it should not be meant or to understood to deny the possibility of further reason.⁵

I agree with the latter point: any claim to a conviction should not deny the possibility of further reason. But, without the emergence of a conviction at some point in the arguing there can be no moral argument at all, indeed no moral realm. Whether this is a fundamental conviction that enhancing the pleasure of others is a good, and causing them pain, an evil, or whether it has to do with acting in a morally consistent way or whatever, some conviction is needed to get into the argument in the first place, and some conviction will remain at the end,

⁵ *ibid.* p.115

either the original one, or that one modified or a new one altogether. It is this human capacity to have and develop moral convictions which calls out for a wider interpretive framework than Dworkin allows himself. These convictions are not simply the convictions that emerge from what is already implicit in the premises, as in maths. That is only one element in moral reasoning. It is the conviction that emerges when a moral premise is recognised as such, namely, that it is a moral premise which persuades us. I not think that however much we rightly emphasise the importance of moral reasoning we can in the end avoid some talk about recognition, or insight. This does not, as Dworkin insists, preclude further reasoning, but it must be there, or there would be no moral reasoning in the first place.

Austin Farrer once asked

What is the supreme motive of a truth seeking mind? Is it to explode shams or to acknowledge realities....after all the detection of shams, the clarification of argument, and the sifting of evidence-after all criticism, all analysis-a person must make up their mind what is there most worthy of love, and most binding on conduct, in the world of real existence. It is this decision, or this discovery, that is the supreme exercise of a truth seeking intelligence.⁶

On the basis of his writings what would the answer of Dworkin to that question be? It falls into two parts: first, a recognition of the dignity of every human being, more specifically the equal concern and regard governments are to have for every one of their citizens, and secondly, a recognition of the vocation we all have as individuals to live life well.

In an earlier book on human rights Dworkin wrote

⁶ Austin Farrer, quoted in The One Genius: readings through the year with Austin Farrer, selected by Richard Harries, SPCK, 1987, p.153

Anyone who professes to take rights seriously must accept, at the minimum, the vague but powerful idea of human dignity.⁷

We might also note in passing that Amartya Sen similarly finds the basis of human rights “in the ethical principle that every individual has claims to the attention and regard of others.”⁸

I agree with Dworkin about human dignity. But this is not just the acceptance of an idea; it is the recognition in practise of the dignity of particular people, of each particular person.

This suggests that there is in moral decision making an inescapable element of sheer recognition – a recognition that other human beings have value in themselves for themselves. In 1511 Bartolomé de las Casas heard a sermon by a Dominican preacher who, referring to the local Indian population which was being enslaved and ill-treated, asked the congregation “Are they not men? ...Are you not bound to love them as yourselves? In such a state as this, you can no more be saved than the Turks.” It was the same issue that Shylock posed to his Christian tormentors. Most evil in the world has been brought about because of this failure of recognition, when sometimes whole peoples have been regarded as disposable.

Moral reasoning, however important is not all that is involved in making moral judgements. We can all recognize that if someone asks “Why do you love me?” and they receive the reply “Because of your fabulous car”, this may be a reason but it is not one that is going to satisfy the person who asked the question. If they receive the reply “I love you because of your beautiful body” they may be half-satisfied but if they then respond by saying “But what happens when I get old. I want you to love me for myself” we are likely to sympathise with them. Reasons may reflect a fundamental recognition about the worth of the other and

⁷ Ronald Dworkin, *On taking Human Rights Seriously*, 1984, p.192

⁸ Amartya Sen, “Law and Human Rights”, The British Institute of Human Rights Brief, Summer 2005, p.12

indeed they should: but they cannot be a substitute for it nor can they be guaranteed to bring it about. To say “I love your smile....your face...your hair” can all reflect the fact that the person is loved for themselves and these are features of that self which is loved. But to say “I love you because of your face” is ambiguous. The highest form of love is to love someone for themselves, just because they are themselves. Reasons may help to elucidate or express this but cannot be a substitute for it. This is well brought out in play by the Irish writer, Frank McGuinness, in There came a gypsy riding by. In this play a family meets together on the anniversary of their son Gene’s suicide. They are given a note he wrote but this gives no indication at all as to why he had taken his own life. They are doubly distressed: for his death, and the fact that he gave no reason for it. Then the father says to his wife

I looked into his coffin the morning of his funeral. I said something to him that nobody heard. I’ve not told you nor Simon nor Louise ...I told him if I were given one wish, I would go back in time to before he was born and I would not change him, Gene, I would still choose him. I would not change my child, no matter what.⁹

Those words express a fundamental appreciation of someone being of worth and of value simply as they are, for themselves. Reasons might elucidate and evoke that act of recognition, but they cannot guarantee to bring it about.

Nothing that has been said above should be taken as detracting from the importance of moral reasoning. Its importance has been well brought out by the Catholic philosopher Herbert McCabe. He came to love watching ice skating on television. It made him say such things as “Marvellous...lovely...beautiful”. A friend with him who was an expert was equally full of praise but talked about it in terms of double salchows, the toeless lutz, reverse walley jumps and other technical terms. McCabe expressed his value judgments but the expert described what it was to be a good skater. “He expressed his view that something was *good* precisely by describing what it *was*. In this case, the

⁹ Frank McGuinness, There came a gypsy riding, Faber, 2000, p.75

account of what it was, was an account, and the best account, of it being good.” In a similar way we can give an account of what it is to be a good person. So, it would be very odd if “good skater” could be spelt out in terms of what good skaters do or can do...whereas “good person” were merely an expression of my feelings or desires”.¹⁰

This analogy is important for two reasons. First, it accords with what we all know perfectly well, namely that you don't have to be an intellectual to be a good person nor is being an intellectual any kind of guarantee you will be one. The simplest, least educated person is capable of making right moral decisions. A farm labourer shelters a Jewish family and hides them from the Nazis at the risk and eventual cost of his own life. Some moral philosophers supported the Nazi creed and countless intellectuals were morally blind.

One of the many moving stories that came out of World War II did indeed concern a Jew who had been sheltered by a farmer and his wife at the risk of their own lives. After the war, when interviewed about what they had done and why they had done it, the farmer replied “Why do you ask?” It was obvious to him what they had to do. It needed no reason, religious or philosophical. The farmer and his wife simply recognized what was right, and, not so usual, did it almost instinctively. This same basic act of moral recognition and action was more widespread than is often recognized.¹¹ That is the highest kind of moral behaviour, not one that is inferior to either a more philosophically sophisticated or a religiously justified one.

So in response to the question posed by Farrer, “What is there most worthy of love and most binding on conduct in the real world?” the first difference between a religious believer and the position of Dworkin is simply this. Dworkin's moment of recognition arises in relation to the human being in front of him, the dignity of that person in themselves, for themselves. So we hope, it true also for the believer. But for the believer there is also, including this but opening out

¹⁰ Herbert McCabe, *The Good Life: Ethics and the Pursuit of Happiness*, Continuum, 2005, p.20/21

¹¹ See Richard Harries, *After the Evil*, OUP, 1963, p.11-12

beyond it, the further act of recognition of God as good, all good, our true and everlasting good, so, of God as God.

The second foundational conviction for Dworkin is the integrally related concepts of living well and having a good life. He recognises that there is something mysterious about the human sense of wanting to live well, that is, to live a life we can take pride in way that there is not about for example in wanting to eat and drink. As he puts it:

We are charged to live well by the bare fact of our existence as self-conscious creatures with lives to lead...It is *important* that we live well; not important just to us or to anyone else, but just important."¹²

This living well is integrally related to the value of having a critically good life, that is, one in which the human dignity of others is fully acknowledged and taken into account.

I fully accept, in line with my earlier line of argument, that this sense belongs to our humanity as such, and does not require, in any logical sense, a religious justification. However, what I would suggest is that the concept of interpretation, which is fundamental to Dworkin's whole position, allows us to interpret our human experience in the widest, most coherent and consistent manner possible, and this is what a religious interpretation seeks to do.

Seeking the widest possible interpretative framework, that sense of responsibility to live well finds, for the believer, its proper place in the conviction that we are daughters and sons of a Good Creator to whom we are ultimately accountable. This conviction is not logically required, but it is one element in an interpretative framework that takes into account all aspects of human existence and, in popular parlance, make sense of them. Following Kant's demolition of the traditional arguments for the existence of God, there is no logical reason why the universe as a whole should make sense. It might not. We cannot say. But we cannot deny, I would suggest, that it would be more intellectually satisfying if it did make sense, that is, if there was an interpretive framework in which all the

¹² Justice for Hedgehogs, p.196

values that Dworkin affirms find their proper place in a wider interpretative framework. He works with a value holism which seeks to hold together all the human values in which he believes, in both personal and public life. The value holism of a religious believer goes beyond this to take into account also the sheer givenness and goodness of the created order, in which we are conscious of having a key role, as well as the evil, of which we are perpetrators.

Dworkin's truth seeking mind, looking for that which is most worthy of love and binding on conduct in the real world, finds it in the importance of living well, that is in a life we can take pride in, an integral component of this being a recognition of the dignity of other human beings. It is this that shapes and imbues his value holism. It is this which enables him to wake and find himself in the morally aware circle of being truly human. For the religious believer that morally aware circle has become enchanted, because to be human is to be made in the image of God and, many would add, is to be called to grow into his likeness.

Dworkin ends his book with a moving paragraph that brings together his whole theme, political and personal.

The justice we have imagined begins in what seems like an unchallengeable proposition: that government must treat those under its dominion with equal concern and respect. That justice does not threaten-it expands-our liberty. It does not trade freedom for equality or the other way round. It does not cripple enterprise for the sake of cheats. It favours neither big nor small government but only just government. It is drawn from dignity and aims at dignity. It makes it easier and more likely for each of us to live a good life well. Remember, too, that the stakes are more than mortal. Without dignity our lives are only blinks of duration. But if we manage to live a good life well, we create something more. We write a subscript to our mortality. We make our lives tiny diamonds in the cosmic sands.¹³

¹³ *ibid.* p.423

That is a noble ideal, none nobler. “tiny diamonds in the cosmic sands”.
But it brings to mind a poem of Gerard Manley Hopkins which envisages the end
of time

In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and
This Jack, joke, potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,
Is immortal diamond¹⁴

The position I have set out here is also argued for in a new essay by the
Roman Catholic philosopher John Cottingham. Like Dworkin he argues that
moral values like goodness cannot be arrived at via either science or theology,
and that believers and non-believers share the same moral realm whose
currency is a form of reasoning that they have in common. John Cottingham then
goes on however to suggest there is something more involved here, connected
to the fact that words like truth, beauty and goodness have a certain authority

Truth is *to be believed*; beauty is *to be admired*; and goodness *to be
pursued*. These imperatives in a certain sense constrain us, whether we like it or
not...They have a magnetic quality, a kind of inbuilt “to be pursuedness”.¹⁵

One aspect of this is the fact when we recognise, say, that cruelty to
children is wrong, even wicked, we are recognising something that has
conclusive or unconditional force, one that requires our compliance. Cottingham
thinks that this feature of moral claims and values is best understood against the
background of belief in a good God, whose life and character we are called on to
share and reflect.

¹⁴ “That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection”, The Poems of
Gerard Manley Hopkins Ed W H Gardner and N H MacKenzie, OUP 1970

¹⁵ John Cottingham, “The Source of Goodness”, in God, Goodness and Philosophy, ed. Harriet A.
Harris, Ashgate, 2011, p.53

So my second point is: though there can be no proof, there is that about the position of the seriously moral person, which calls out for a wider, theological interpretation.

I now want to approach this subject from another vantage point, that of secular philosophers who are distressed about the lack of any solid moral framework for Western Society. Michael Sandel, another distinguished Harvard Professor, for example, shows that the dominant ideology of the West in recent decades, a combination of social and market liberalism is inadequate by itself to account for and express out deepest moral concerns. However important liberty might be, in itself it cannot be the only or always the overriding value. He shows this with a number of telling examples, of which I only quote one.

In Germany a man advertised for someone willing to be cooked and eaten. 200 people enquired, four were interviewed, and one was duly chosen, cooked and eaten. The German authorities found that the man could not be charged with murder, though he was eventually tried and imprisoned under another category. Sandel points out that the action could not have been more consensual. People need not have responded to the advertisement, they need not have gone for interviews, they need not have gone through with it when chosen. It was the very epitome of social and market liberalism. Yet, of course, we are horrified.

In a range of such examples Sandel shows that neither economic liberalism nor social liberalism is enough. We need to find other values, in addition to free choice, for society to function as, in our better moments, we want it to. So why have we been reluctant to admit to this for the last fifty years? The first reason is that we all have such different ideas of the good, it would seem impossible for society as a whole to agree on any common notions. Secondly, we fear, and you in the United States particularly fear, that if there was a societal notion of the good, it would be one dominated by fundamentalists. But as Sandel pertinently remarks. "Fundamentalists rush in where liberals fear to tread."

Liberals stress the notion of each their own understanding of the good, indeed it has come to be seen as one of the defining characteristics of a liberal. But Sandel rightly points out that if they do not engage in the debate about a common good the ground will be occupied by others.

Sandel has recently worked out his thesis in another important book, What Money can't buy: the moral limits of markets.¹⁶ In a series of vivid examples he shows how we have gone from using the market as an efficient mechanism for the distribution of goods and services, to being a market society when almost everything can be bought. He shows how in some areas this not only fails to work from an economic point of view, but how it crowds out precious non-market values. To take just one example, in Israel on a designated donation day students go from door to door collecting money for good causes. An experiment was conducted by two economists. One group of students was given a short motivational speech about the good causes. The second group were given the speech and promised a 1% personal bonus on what they collected. The third group were given the speech and a 10% bonus. The bonuses were not deducted from the amount collected. It turned out that the unpaid students collected 55% more in donations than those who received a 1% reward and 9% more than those who received 10%. Overall Sandel argues that if we believe in non-market values we will have to champion them in the public sphere. Economics is not neutral and we cannot leave everything to financial incentives. At the moment many of the values that we cherished thirty years ago are being undermined and crowded out.

Michael Sandel's work is just one example of a shift in the tectonic plates of Western secular society. Another is the work of the Nobel prize winner Amartya Sen.¹⁷ But two in particular I wish to refer to. Shortly before he died the much respected thinker Tony Judt wrote a book called Ill Fares the Land. He

¹⁶ Michael Sandel, What money can't buy: the moral limits of markets. Farrer, Strauss and Giroux, 2012 in America, Allen Lane in Great Britain.

¹⁷ Amartya Sen, The Idea of Justice. Allen Lane, 2009

begins “Something is profoundly wrong with the way we live today.”¹⁸ He then points to the growing inequalities in wealth, health and life expectancy in almost every country in the world, and the world as a whole. He notices how in recent decades there has been a preoccupation with the pursuit of wealth combined with an excessive individualism. Everything has been seen in economic terms. We cannot go on like this he says. “We cannot continue to evaluate our world and the choices we make in a moral vacuum.”¹⁹

As many have done before he points out that markets need values such as trust, honesty, and restraint and that “Far from inhering in the nature of capitalism itself, values such as these derived from long standing religious or communitarian practises.”²⁰

Judt laments “the unbearable lightness of politics”, dominated as it is by the ideas of self-expression and freedom of the individual.

“What we lack is a moral narrative: an internally coherent account that ascribes purposes to our actions in a way that transcends them”²¹

An even more striking example of something shifting in the secular world is the work of the German Sociologist, Jurgen Habermas. What is remarkable about his latest work is not only his stress on the debt he thinks European society owes to religion in the past for its most fundamental public values but his thesis that religion still has an indispensable role to play.

There is a profound underlying anxiety in Habermas which is expressed in the title of his book, An awareness of what is missing. For all its achievements, he argues, the modern secular state cannot of itself arouse in people a sense of solidarity with all humanity, motivate people to act for the common good, or even give undergirding reasons why a people should feel loyalty to a political community. Here, clearly, faith communities have a role to play, not least because, he suggests, they encourage community action, whereas secular morality is primarily directed towards the individual as such.

¹⁸ Tony Judt, Ill Fares the Land, Allen Lane, 2010, p.1

¹⁹ Judt, p.37

²⁰ *ibid.* p.38

²¹ *ibid.* p.183

All this, however welcome, might seem obvious enough. But Habermas wants more from religion, as expressed by his reference to “the unexhausted force (das Unabgeholte) of religious traditions”. By this he does not just mean the contribution of faith communities to the tasks indicated in the above paragraph, but the possibility of secular reason assimilating, in its own terms, more of what was once thought of in exclusively religious ways.

Habermas readily affirms that concepts like person, freedom, community and solidarity “are infused with experiences and connotations which stem from the biblical teaching and tradition.”²² He then argues that this process needs to continue, because something crucial is now missing in secular discourse. There is of course a qualification. What counts is the persuasiveness which translations of religious concepts have for the secular environment.

Does this understanding of religion put forward by Habermas imply that its future is to be fully assimilated in secular terms until it is totally attenuated? In short, is it being treated in purely instrumental terms? Habermas strongly denies this, for he maintains that despite the process of assimilation, the basic truth claims of religion will quite properly remain strange and other to secular reasoning. “Faith remains opaque for knowledge in a way which may neither be denied nor simply accepted.”²³

Given these pleas by highly distinguished secular thinkers like Sandel, Judt, Amartya Sen and Habermas, I believe that people of religious faith should work more closely with secular thinkers to build up a much thicker moral framework for our public and economic life, one that includes but goes beyond a simple emphasis on the free choice of the individual. We need to work at what John Rawls calls an overlapping consensus. Now, Rawls of course believes that we have to keep our overall world views out of this consensus, we have to proceed by public reasoning. As already made clear, I have no problem with the concept of public reasoning in principle. It is entirely congruous with what the

²² Jürgen Habermas et al An Awareness of what is missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age, Polity, 2010, p.80

²³ Habermas, p.18

Christian church has taught about our capacity simply as human beings to agree on certain basic moral truths. That said, the concept of public reasoning is not as neutral as it might at first suggest. We bring our world view into public reasoning whether we are aware of it or not, (and we ought to be aware of it), by how we select the evidence and how we weight the arguments.

One of the reasons why I have no problem with the concept of public reasoning is the fact that the New Testament writers, faced with the postponement to the Parousia drew on much prevailing Graeco-Roman ethical thinking and then current moral codes to govern their day to day living. This trend became even more pronounced when the Christian Church became the established faith of the Roman Empire in the 4th century. The great biblical scholar Jerome, writing to a young priest in 420 said

Finally, would you know what sort of apparel the Lord requires you to wear? Prudence, justice, moderation, courage. These are four virtues which should fill your horizon. Think of them as a four-horse team bearing you, Christ's charioteer, along at full speed to your goal. No necklace can be more precious than these; no gems could create a brighter galaxy."

These are of course the four virtues of the classical world. The Church was willing to recognise and incorporate the best secular moral thinking and standards into teaching as it was willing to baptise the best of its artistic and literary heritage. Now an understandable question arises in our minds at this point. Does not the Church or do not other religions have something distinctive to say in this field? I think, from a Christian point of view there are indeed some distinctive elements, though there is not time here to enlarge on that now. The point I want to make now is that what matters, is not whether what we say is distinctive but whether it has theological integrity. Do the principles and values we advocate have an integral relationship to their theological foundation? That is the point well argued by Nigel Biggar.²⁴ And does that foundation include the whole sweep of a Christian approach to the world: creation, redemption and the

²⁴ Nigel Biggar, Behaving in Public: How do do Christian Ethics, Eerdmans, 2011

eschaton, together with a defining place for what Jesus said and did? This is what matters. In a culture historically shaped by the Christian faith we should not be surprised if our own principles and values often coincide with others who have no religious faith. What matters is whether our own advocacy of those principles and values stems in a holistic way from their foundation in the Christian faith. Followers of other faiths could ask the same question about the relationship to their own tradition.

I began by suggesting that the polemical debate between the attack dogs of the new atheism and defenders of the view that only a religiously based morality can have a solid foundation is untrue and unhelpful. Taking my lead from Ronald Dworkin's book I suggested that Christian believers can affirm his view that moral reasoning constitutes a realm of rational discourse which exists in its own right, one that can neither be subverted by scientific findings nor substantiated by metaphysics or religion. In practical terms this means that Christian believers should recognise, affirm and celebrate good values whoever puts them forward. My own preferred analogy for the relationship between a secular based morality and a religiously based one is that between a beautiful musical theme and the symphony from where it comes. The musical theme, that is the values sung by a secular thinker, can indeed be beautiful. But a religious believer claims that she or he knows the symphony of which it is a part, that is, the whole sweep of Divine Purpose.

But whether we share an understanding of that purpose or not we need to co-operate in the goal of achieving an overlapping consensus for a much more robust framework for our economic and public life than we have at the moment. For what is clear from the *cri de coeur* of the secular thinkers I have quoted is that there is an emptiness at the heart of our public life in the West. However important freedom of choice might be, it is not the only value, nor should it always be the overriding one. We need a much richer concept of the common good. Religious people and institutions have an important role to play in thickening and deepening that concept.

So my third point is that there is now an important opportunity for religious people to engage seriously with secular thinkers in working for a much richer concept of the common good than the one that now dominates our public debates.

What has gone wrong, as we might suspect, is in the end a reflection of what has gone wrong with our whole understanding of what it is to be a human being in society. Since the 17th century our culture has been dominated and shaped by an excessively individualistic view of what it is to be a human being. But mind is a social reality. We are persons only in and through our relationships with other persons. The Africans have a good word for it, Ubuntu. Christianity, Judaism and Islam, in their different ways, share this essentially inter-relational understanding of what it is to be human.

Before we are isolated individuals, making our lonely existential choices, we belong together in a common life, a life characterised by interdependence, a changing mixture of dependence and independence; of helping and being helped. Life in families, communities and societies is fundamental to who we are. This means there is a common good and a public good which is not just the sum of our individual preferences. So also there are civic values and virtues which reflect this belonging together; a societal solidarity giving rise to non-market norms. These are norms and values that need to be struggled for in a world increasingly dominated by a market trying to crowd them out. Faith communities are rooted in these values. We need to stand by them, and we can do so not only with one another, but with serious minded secular thinkers.