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An Awareness of What Is Missing: Four Views on the Consequences of Secularism

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Abstract

While the issues regarding widespread secularization in contemporary Western culture are difficult to properly assess, it can be argued that certain prerequisites are necessary for the well-being of any society and, furthermore, that certain of these necessary conditions are only provided by a given civilization's major religious tradition. All societies need to perpetually engage in collective action and decision making, and as any given community faces the challenges of the future, its governing religious worldview is an indispensable source of guidance and time-honored wisdom. With this in mind, it will be argued that Western civilization is dependent upon a Judeo-Christian orientation for its ongoing vibrancy, integrity, and sustainability as a culture. When the background of shared values and norms provided by Judaism and Christianity no longer functions in any unifying capacity, society loses its sense of identity and purpose, and impoverishment in many areas of human life and endeavor is felt and observed. Something—whether it is described as value, order, meaning, community, or charity—goes missing. This diminishment will be analyzed with respect to four different Western fields of study: philosophy, literature, politics, and education.

It can be argued that certain prerequisites are necessary for the well-being of any society, and that certain of these necessary conditions are only provided by a society's major religious tradition. All societies engage in collective action and decision making, and, as any given society faces the challenges of the future, its governing religious worldview is an indispensable source of guidance and time-honored wisdom. It will be argued in the four sections of this paper that Western civilization is dependent upon a Jewish-Christian orientation for its ongoing vibrancy, integrity, and sustainability. As a corollary, when the background of shared values and norms provided by Judaism and Christianity no longer functions in any unifying capacity, the society dependent on those values and norms loses its sense of identity and purpose, and impoverishment in many areas of human life and endeavor is felt and observed. Something—whether it is described as value, order, meaning, community, or charity—goes missing.

In the following, this loss will be analyzed with respect to four different areas of modern Western society. Engaging with Jürgen Habermas and some of his interlocutors, Rachel Hunt Steenblik will discuss in the first section how politics needs religion to provide the pre-political assumptions that make a successful politics possible. The second section will feature an analysis by Heidi Zameni of the ways in which the teaching of literature is adversely affected when religious understanding and religious values are excluded as tools of interpretation and assessment. In the third section, Debbie Ostorga will comment on the changing sense of purpose governing the increasingly secularized university. For centuries universities were institutions

committed to preserving and promoting the highest values and ideals of Western society; today universities are often dreadfully practical in their focus. The moral vision has flown. Lastly, Nathan Greeley will attempt to show why morality is not, properly speaking, morality without God.

Rachel Hunt-Steenblik — An Awareness of What is Missing in the Political Sphere

In *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age*, renowned philosopher Jürgen Habermas, and others, consider what reason is missing when faith is absent, particularly in the political sphere. They recognize that secular society's tendency to handily dismiss faith in praise of reason is no longer sufficient for our post-secular society. Indeed, these thinkers see a "renewed visibility of religion" that must be accounted for (Reder and Schmidt 1).

While religious institutions have changed during the "modern and postmodern eras...they nevertheless remain a phenomenon of major social importance" (1). This is especially evident in western societies, where the influence of religion is persistently found in the political domain, in political conversations, as well as in the more quotidian social domain. Consequently, religion retains its social significance, which in turn adds to its political significance.

It becomes important to ask what role religion has in these societies, for citizens of various religions, or for those who consider themselves non-religious. This question takes on even greater weight for those concerned with "society as a whole," and have noticed that religion does play a social role (4).

Much of Habermas's discussion concerns the discursive relationship between reason and faith, and what he perceives as a deeply troubling gap in the interlocutors' discourse. Within this framework, he extends tailored invitations to both secular and spiritual persons. Reason is challenged to reflect upon itself, and consider precisely what it is missing in relation to faith. It is also invited to remember its shared history with religion (manifested, in part, from Augustine to Thomas). Faith, on the other hand, is called to "translate the contents of religious language into a secular one and thus...make them accessible to all" (7). Both "partners in the dialogue" are invited to be charitable to the other, and take one another seriously, "in particular regarding their core convictions" (14). Only then may they enter into a genuine discourse which can benefit whole societies and states.

When Habermas speaks of reason in terms of what is missing, he alludes to a particular kind of deficiency. Reason does not lack something that it cannot have, but "something which it could have but does not and which it painfully misses" (Brieskorn 26). This something that is primarily lost and needs to be recovered is none other than the human element: "Among the modern societies, only those that are able to introduce into the secular domain the essential contents of their religious traditions which point beyond the merely human realm will also be able to rescue the substance of the human" (Habermas, *Politik* 142). This may be because humans are endowed with more than brains, minds, and logic; they are also endowed with hearts, feelings, and intuition.

A reason that reflects "on the religious" is not only capable of recovering the essentially human: it can also develop a more accurate understanding of history. Likewise, faith elucidates that history is interwoven with a religious element, and that no world or local history would be complete without inclusion of the sacred in the lives of its people. Religion is intimately and inextricably tied to the world's events, as well as to the world's ideas, so much so that we are unable to comprehend the "central concepts of the history of ideas" if we ignore that they arose in many instances from "religious convictions" (Reder and Schmidt 5).

Still, this precursory understanding is not enough. “In addition to this historical knowledge,” philosophy should learn that religions “maintain indispensable semantic elements which differ fundamentally from” itself “and which may be important for the just ordering of modern societies” (4-5). Welcoming faith into the public and political spheres can help aid reason in this “just ordering.”

It becomes clear that faith and knowledge “stand in a reciprocal relation” (6). Each are needed in responding to society’s most pressing “social questions such as those posed by bioethics.” Religion “proves to be an important moral resource in this context,” for religious citizens are able to ‘justify moral questions’ in a way that pure reason is not. Indeed, they possess unique “access to a potential” for delineating these crucial queries (6). The “meaning endowing function” of religion contributes a moral foundation for public dialogue and therefore plays an essential role in “the public sphere” (6).

Moreover, a democracy depends on many things that cannot be legislated or commanded. Among these are “moral stances” arising from “pre-political sources,” including religious modes of living. All majority decisions made in democracies rely on the “prior ethical convictions of their citizens.” This is true in part because each participant enters the political sphere carrying previously acquired ideologies and beliefs. It is neither preferable nor possible for politics to separate citizens from their preconceived moral intuitions. Indeed, these pre-political sources act in two important functions, first, “for democracy as a background,” and second, as a strong “source of motivation,” even though they are unable to serve as ‘normative guidelines for the democratic’ process (7).

Habermas explains this further in a discussion with Pope Benedict XVI:

Citizens are expected to make active use of their rights to communication and to participation, not only in what they rightly take to be their own interests, but also with an orientation to the common good. This demands a more costly commitment and motivation, and these cannot simply be imposed by law. For example, in a democratic constitutional state, a legal obligation to vote would be just as alien as a legal requirement to display solidarity. All one can do is suggest to the citizens of a liberal society that they should be willing to get involved on behalf of fellow citizens whom they do not know and who remain anonymous to them and that they should accept sacrifices that promote common interests.

This is why both political and moral virtues “are essential if democracy is to exist” (Habermas and Ratzinger, 30).

Modern reason understands “the universalistic and egalitarian concepts of morality and law which shape the freedom of the individual and interpersonal relations” (Habermas, “An Awareness” 18). Nevertheless, the choice to “engage in action based on solidarity when faced with threats which can be averted only by collective effort calls for more than insight into good reasons” (18-19). Only religion preserves the images “of the moral whole... as collectively binding ideals,” thus demonstrating the greatest limitation of practical reason (19).

This same reason “fails to fulfill its own vocation when it no longer has sufficient strength to awaken, and to keep awake, in the minds of secular subjects, an awareness of the violations of solidarity throughout the world,” what Habermas describes as “an awareness of what is missing,” and “of what cries out to heaven” (19). What is needed is a “mode of legitimation founded on convictions,” as well as the “support of reasons which can be accepted

in a pluralistic society by religious citizens, by citizens of different religions, and by secular citizens alike” (20).

Religion is called upon to open up its content, to “recognize for reasons of its own the neutrality of the state towards world-views, the equal freedom of all religious communities, and the independence of the institutionalized sciences” (21). The state should not require its citizens to “split their existence into public and private parts, for example by obliging them to justify their stances in the political arena” purely “in terms of non-religious reasons” (21). First, there is always a blurring between a person’s motivations, making any division artificial at best. Second, a religious person should be allowed to be religiously motivated, even in the political realm.

As stated by Habermas, religiously “justified stances” should be granted “a legitimate place in the public sphere,” manifesting that the “political community officially recognizes that religious utterances can make a meaningful contribution to clarifying controversial questions of principle” (22). Religious persons become responsible for making their utterances understandable in “a publicly accessible language.” They must also accept the “authority of ‘natural’ reason as the fallible results of the institutionalized sciences and the basic principles of universalistic egalitarianism in law and morality” (16). Secular persons become responsible “not to treat religious expressions as simply irrational. Further, “secular reason may not set itself up as the judge concerning truths of faith, even though in the end it can accept as reasonable only what it can translate into its own, in principle universally, accessible, discourses” (22; 16).

As both reason and faith reflect upon the limits of their own positions, needed learning and communication can take place. This allows the two distinct sides to speak “with one another” rather than “merely about one another,” which Habermas perceives as a profound difference (16). The most essential thing, for Habermas, is that human beings “foster a willingness to communicate” together “on the basis of a reason that unites them and possesses authority for them” (Reeder and Schmidt 10). Language and discourse become the keys. The French philosopher, Emanuel Levinas, pointed out that it is through language that we are able to have relationships of peace, where neither party is absorbed into the other, but can remain absolute, Habermas reveals that it is through language that neither faith nor reason are assimilated into the other. Reason, if reasonable enough, will engage with faith to promote political peace and unity in the public sphere, and will foster the “motivation to show solidarity” that comes so easily to religion (Brieskorn 29). Reason, rightly applied, will also develop a better understanding of history, and rescue the essentially human.

Heidi Zameni — Prose without a Soul: The Secularization of Literary Studies

Until recently, literature and religion have enjoyed a comfortable relationship. Throughout the history of Western civilization, literature was an important aspect of an education. Precepts and moral guides were written into stories, poetry, and dramas, in order to reinforce society’s common values. The Old Testament, the Greek and Norse myths, the Bhagavad Gita, and other early works indicate that the original authors and the intended audiences thought less about the literary value of their texts and more about their religious worth (Tennyson and Ericson 9). In Thomas Carlyle’s 1841 seminal collection of orations *On Heroes, Hero Worship and the Heroic in History*, he explains the importance of the “Man of Letters”: “I many a time say, the writers of Newspapers, Pamphlets, Poems, Books, these are the real working effective Church of a modern country. . . . How much more [the writer], who says, or in any way brings home to our heart the noble doings, feelings, darings and endurances of a brother

man! He has verily touched our hearts as with a live coal from the altar. Perhaps there is no worship more authentic” (188). Later on during the same lectures, Carlyle reemphasizes the point: “Books are our Church too” (189). For Carlyle and others of his day, literature offered a spiritual light mirroring a religious perspective.

Literature has long since lost that primacy. Our increasingly naturalistic-oriented society has secularized our approach to the study and discussion of literature. We are an academy which revels in man’s ability to create meaning through statistics, facts, textual analysis—scientifically verifiable data—instead of a metaphysical pursuit of knowledge. The idea that there could be any critical understanding gained from a religious perspective has been set aside, but this has come at a high cost. As Ryken so aptly puts it, “Western culture has emphasized the person as worker (the Reformation tradition and Marx) and the person as thinker (Aquinas and Descartes). And the result in the words of Harvey Cox is that 'man's celebrative and imaginative faculties have atrophied. . . . His shrunken psyche is just as much a victim of industrialization as were the bend bodies of those luckless children who were once confined to English factories from dawn to dusk'" (Ryken 19). If we accept the secularization of literary studies, we have nothing to balance our postmodern angst. When the metaphysical needs of man or woman are removed, only impoverishment of spirit is left. Criticism is left vaporous. The sense of mystery vanishes. In the words of Flannery O’Connor “[i]t is the business of fiction to embody mystery . . . , and mystery is a great embarrassment to the modern mind” (124). The mystery of which O’Connor speaks is that of our existential condition. Literature in the hands of a talented artist reveals that central mystery. Leaving out expressions of compassion, piety, grace, morality, and other metaphysical concerns, modern literary criticism has lost its heart.

The secularization of the religious in English literature began in Early Modern England, with King Henry VIII’s edict, declaring a separation from papal authority and the creation of a new Church of England. David Cressy and Lori Anne Ferrell explain that during this period religion “permeated every aspect of English society. . . . Public and private affairs alike were deeply infused by religion” (1). In studying the literature of the time, they found that “many of [the] texts reveal diametrically opposed impulses: the search for a faith that convinced the intellect, and for a religion that satisfied the heart” (2). While we may not agree that the two impulses (faith and intellect) are antithetical, it is clear that the Early Modern citizens were a staunchly religious body, and they viewed literature and life from within a metaphysical context.

This viewpoint changed dramatically in the nineteenth century when worldviews shifted toward a naturalistic outlook. The “scientific method” became the preeminent way of knowing about our world, replacing religion as the receptacle of truth. Old ways of looking at literature gave way to modern literary theory. Being able to deconstruct a text using scientific, even esoteric, methodologies was seen as the pinnacle of scholarly pursuits. The Judeo-Christian ethos was replaced with a secular one. As George Marsden explains, it is not that academia is now “hostile to religion; but the norm for people to be fully accepted in academic culture is to act as though their religious beliefs had nothing to do with education. Scholars are expected to analyze subjects such as the nature of reality, beauty, truth, morality, the just society, the individual, and the community [all topics discussed in literature classes today] as though deeply held religious beliefs had no relevance to such topics” (23-24). How does this secularization operate in a literature classroom today? John C. Green gives an excellent example:

If a professor talks about studying something from a Marxist point of view, others might disagree but not dismiss the notion. But if a professor proposed to study something from a Catholic or Protestant point of view, it would be treated like proposing something from a Martian point of view (qtd. in Marsden 7).

The epistemological value of religious convictions in the study of literature has been dismissed. Other viewpoints, such as feminism, Marxism, and Freudian analysis, are found to be more reliable in the pursuit of truth. We have, in Marsden's words, reached a point where "in the name of multiculturalism we have silenced some of our major sub-cultures" (32).

Problems arise, however, when the soul of literature is taken out, replaced by the hegemony of moral relativism. Since no universal ethical or moral boundaries exist, the catch phrase "what's true for you" becomes the default guideline by which we evaluate a text. In other words, anything goes as long as a viewpoint is secular. Never one to mince words, C.S. Lewis aptly describes this problem of secularization in his *The Abolition of Man or Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools*.ⁱ In this, Lewis attempted to "tackle nothing less than the hegemony of relativism in modern western culture." He found that this "subjectivism was most apparent and dangerous in epistemology" (Travers 109). Lewis quotes Confucius in his epigraph: "The Master said, He who sets to work on a different stand destroys the whole fabric." In other words, to destroy man's traditional values results in the abolition of man.

Lewis begins by analyzing an English grammar book popular in England during his time. He decries the author's "debunking" of truth and emphasis on indoctrination. Lewis posits that this type of pedagogy teaches "nothing about letters" (the actual subject of the textbook) and instead cuts out the soul of the child "long before he is old enough to choose." Lewis calls this the work of the "amateur philosopher where [we] expected the work of professional grammarians" (23). In other words, what children are being taught is a philosophical and ethical outlook on life that has replaced universal moral law with subjective, false sentiments. Lewis goes on to explain that, until modern history, there was an understanding amongst humanity that "certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are" (29). It is within this framework wherein most children were educated and laws were created. Ethics demanded a universal code, a law, an order, and this was taught in schools. However, this has no longer become the case: "Where the old initiated, the new merely 'conditions'" (32). Thus, relativism found its foothold. Lewis found this new type of education worrisome and indoctrinating.

Lewis cites Plato in his *Republic* wherein Plato offers that "Reason [the head] in man must rule the mere appetites [the belly] by means of the 'spirited element' [the chest]" (34). From Lewis's viewpoint, Western civilization, as evidenced in the modern English grammar book, has been pushed outside of the Greek philosopher's framework. In Lewis's words, they "remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests [spirit/soul] and expect of them virtue and enterprise" (35). The result—a purely subjective morality.

Lewis succinctly states the goal of such a warped teaching of literature: "[T]he whole purpose of [the pedagogue's grammar] book is so to condition the young reader that he will share their approval" (40). The relativism taught is only the subjective viewpoint of those in power, of those teaching such ideologies to the young. In other words, the strict skepticism of values, in particular traditional ones, is only surface level; it is only to be used on other people's values and not one's own: "A great many of those who 'debunk' traditional . . . values have in the

background values of their own which they believe to be immune from the debunking process. They claim to be cutting away the parasitic growth of emotion, religious sanction, and inherited taboos, in order that ‘real’ or ‘basic’ values may emerge” (42).ⁱⁱ This debunking gives way to the secularization of literary studies.

Referring to the new grammar lessons, Lewis sums up, “The Innovator attacks traditional values (what he calls the Tao) in defense of what he at first supposes to be (in some special sense) ‘rational’ or ‘biological’ values” (53-54). Lewis defines the Tao as “Natural Law, Traditional Morality or the First Principles of Practical Reason or the First Platitudes” and argues that it is not one among many systems of truth or systems of value: it is the only source of all value judgments (56)ⁱⁱⁱ. Historically, education through literature endeavored to produce the kind of student prescribed by the Tao. This was a universal norm espoused by traditional educators. Contrarily, moral relativists now produce values that are only “natural phenomena” and judgments that are conditioned (74). The problem is this: “Nature, untrammelled by values, rules the conditioners and, through them, all humanity. . . .” (80). This anti-metaphysical way of evaluating literature takes the beauty away: “The stars do not become Nature till we can weigh and measure them: the soul does not become Nature till we can psycho-analyse her” (83). The resultant exclusion of the religious viewpoint isn’t so much the discrimination against a religious scholarly approach (although that might be the case), but that religion’s approach is seen as less intellectual. Faith-informed scholarship is deemed intrinsically inferior.

What would literary criticism and the teaching of literature look like if a religious viewpoint was acknowledged? First, it would not mean the favoring of one author over another due to his/her religious perspective, the interpreting of historic literature through God’s providential intervention, or the quoting of scripture in class. It would not be proselytizing. Rather, it would mean making a place for the Judeo-Christian or religious scholar—to allow that worldview to have equal standing among others. This would not mean that scholars with a religious perspective should churn out sentimental gibberish. They should adhere to the common standards of literary criticism and pedagogical practices. This also means that no professor should use his or her position as a religious soap box. Fairness and tolerance of opinions would still be expected. What we are arguing for, then, is the inclusion of a religious voice and of the value of that presence. The silencing of any one worldview has serious implications, particularly when that view is one that has been considered traditionally of value. T.S. Eliot states, “The whole of modern literature is corrupted by what I call Secularism, that it is simply unaware of, simply cannot understand the meaning of, the primacy of the supernatural over the natural life: of something which I assume to be our primary concern” (28). It is in the belief of a metaphysical world, or at least the acknowledgement of the possibility of one, wherein we can meet the needs of the twenty-first century student of literature and the field of contemporary literary criticism.

Debbie Ostorga — Moral Development of College Students

The moral development of its students was one of the chief purposes of the colonial college. Thelin states that in colonial colleges “all learning ultimately was to coalesce into the values and actions of a Christian gentlemen” (Thelin 24). However, despite the fact that moral development was central to its purpose. Thelin asserts that “it is not evident that the values espoused by the Puritan college builders were especially humane or tolerant...college founders were impatient or at best indifferent to disagreements within Congregationalism and

Presbyterianism, and they were downright hostile toward Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism” (29).

Families who sent their sons to college were very concerned about their moral training and believed that colleges should provide that training. Thelin states that “by the eighteenth century the college had supplemented and perhaps replaced the family as the transmitter of social lessons” (25). Around the turn of the twentieth century many institutions U.S. higher education began to abandon their religious affiliations. Furthermore, the history of higher education reveals that, concurrently, moral development went from the center of university (its classrooms) to the margins (the extracurricular) (Marsden; Reuben). Many scholars have noted that the growing lack of moral development was a result of the secularization of the university. Today most universities espouse the importance of developing a student’s moral character; however universities are missing what the colonial colleges had, a theistically founded morality.

Colonial colleges were founded by various Christian denominations, as universities had been since medieval times. They educated only 1% of the population (Thelin 20). The small minority that attended colonial colleges are described by Thelin as “aristocrats, who love liberty and hate equality.” For most, concerns about moral training were a priority. Theological training was not, however, the main mission of these colleges according to Thelin; colonial colleges did not even award degrees in divinity (27). Thelin states that governors in various colonies hoped “that college alumni who became clergy would provide an antidote to the threat of uneducated or ‘unlettered’ revivalist preachers...[governors] were concerned that ‘enthusiasm’ not reasoned belief would come to dominate colonial religion and society” (28). Despite its religious underpinnings, by the end of the nineteenth century classes in religious and moral philosophy disappeared from the curriculum and courses devoted to religion and morality declined (Reuben 115).

This decline concerned many university leaders who began to struggle with ways to develop the student’s moral character. William Adams Brown, who was a provost at Yale in the early twentieth century cites the importance of curricular cohesion and asserts that “Christian faith provides to bring unity and consistency into man’s thought of the universe” (qtd. in Longfield 160).

Some universities attempted to maintain the unity of the curriculum by going back to the classical liberal education model (Reuben 236). They believed that free and open inquiry lead to specialized disciplines, which in their view lacked any overarching themes or connections to one another (237). However, the attempts to address the lack of curricular unity and overspecialization failed. Reuben states “the aims of curricular reforms as twofold: to restore unity and moral purpose to college education and to promote a higher level of scholarship among undergraduates” (238). A liberal arts curriculum, they believed, would be best suited to develop a student moral character. However, the faculty opposed this change in curricular offerings. Reuben asserts “after failing to create a modern source of moral training, faculty were more willing to abandon the principle of unity than to stray too far from the principle of freedom and the practice of specialized scholarship” (243). In the end curricular reforms failed in creating a common course of study which was unifying and cultivated morality.

The lack of religious traditions and unity at the turn of the twentieth century coupled with the expansion of higher education was a catalyst for new universities to create the “collegiate way” or “college life” which was to be the new unifying factor (255). Some of the markers of college life were the development of college sports, college colors, college mascots, college hymns. These aspects of college life began to make the schools unique from one another. The

replacement of religious traditions with college traditions at the turn of the century reflects the secularization of U.S. universities. It was believed that group identity could serve as the most effective moral influence on students. Reuben asserts that at that time morality became identified with behavior rather than belief (268). Thelin asserts that “the elaborate extracurricular of athletics teams and musical groups later associated with the ‘collegiate way’ were not part of the true colonial colleges” (Thelin 22). Simultaneously, student affairs professionals were added to the university workforce. Reuben asserts “commitment to student services reflected their growing belief that the moral value of a university education resided in the community life of students, not in their formal education” (Reuben 225). Student affairs were responsible for upholding the school standards, overseeing the extracurricular and moral development of students. Currently, the function of student affairs professionals is essentially the same as it was then. There is a clear distinction between student and academic affairs. Student affairs professionals deal with issues of student misconduct ranging from academic dishonesty to sexual assault. For example, most campuses have established protocols to deal with a breach in university standards such as academic dishonesty.

Moral development, whether influenced by secular values or theistic values, is always reflective of what is socially acceptable during a particular time period. The current issue of *New Directions for Higher Education* is entitled “Facilitating the moral growth of college students”. In this issue student affair professionals write about ways to promote student moral development. Stewart asserts that “engaging in difficult dialogues and practicing patience, compassion and forgiveness assist with the continual development of moral maturity” (Stewart 70). One could argue that these principles of patience, compassion, and forgiveness come out of Christianity. One could also argue that the lack of theistic based morality may limit the way in which students develop moral character.

The debate in higher education about the importance of character and moral development is still important. Nicgorski asserts that “moral education is the most important part, the very substance, of socialization” (Nicgorski 21). Early college leaders were also concerned with this; they believed they had a moral mission which was the wellbeing of society (166). The difference is that today, many in the academy believe that morality based on science is more authoritative than morality based on religion (171). Habermas warns of the ill that may result in the political sphere when religion and reason are not in conversation with one another. This concern also applies to universities. Habermas implies that people in the post-modern world miss the morality that comes with theological insight. Habermas states that “religious utterances can make a meaningful contribution of clarifying controversial questions of principle” (Habermas, “An Awareness” 22). University leaders and others in the academy who are dismissive of religiously founded values fail to recognize the value that these insights can bring to a conversation.

Colonial colleges started off with a theistically based morality. The very mission of those schools was reflected in this. However, U.S. colleges went through a period of expansion and transition at the end of the nineteenth century. During this transition moral training was moved to the margins. Now the issue is whether universities, by marginalizing morality and a Christian worldview, has lost their ability to develop a student’s moral character? Will they learn from previous university leaders; leaders who recognized that the loss of a theistically founded morality is not only a disservice to the student’s moral growth but also to the strength of the society which will eventually be led by those same students?

Nathan Greeley — The Dependence of Morality upon Theism

The notion of a necessary relationship between theism and morality is a hotly contested one today. Whereas in the not so distant past, it was thought that a necessary relationship between the two was quite self-evident, this consensus has dramatically eroded over the past two centuries. Most philosophers in our contemporary world consider the view that morality's possession of sense and intelligibility is inconceivable without a transcendent underpinning to be no more than a relic of a past age. The sense or meaning of morality is now attributed to any number of mundane and empirical realities, most having to do with the social utility of various norms and values. It will be the purpose of this section to argue that morality requires a definition that makes the acts of human beings either objectively moral or immoral, and that the only means of securing such a definition is to argue that the moral order is established by the ultimate authority, namely God.

In Western thought, the disassociation of theism and morality stems from Enlightenment criticisms, arguments that made belief in God seem to be an impossibility. These skeptical arguments, found in the writings of Hume, Voltaire, Lessing, and others, are now part of our common cultural inheritance, and need not be rehearsed here. What is significant for the purposes of this essay is that for many philosophers and ethicists, these arguments dictated finding a naturalistic basis for the sense and meaning of morality as the conceptions of morality derived from theistic natural law or divine command were deemed incredible and untenable. Most modern thinkers, regardless of their less than enthusiastic regard for naturalistic ethical conceptions, have arrived at the conclusion that dictates that nothing better is available, and hence that theistic critiques of naturalistic ethics, even when acute and incisive, cannot be taken too seriously. Due to this oftentimes happy resignation, the paradigm shift to naturalistic ethics is, in many quarters, today a fait accompli. Yet the rethinking of the basis of morality found in naturalistic ethics raises some important questions that should not be too hastily brushed aside. It is important, I would argue, that we reach a high degree of clarity with respect to what the differences are between theistic and naturalistic conceptions of morality. Only then can it become fully evident whether a naturalistic ethics is truly a worthy substitute for theistic morality. It is my belief that naturalistic morality is unacceptable as a substitute, precisely because the objectivity of morality, so essential to the very definition of morality, goes missing on a naturalistic account. This should demand that theism be considered or reconsidered, in spite of any *prima facie* difficulties that such a position entails.

To provide perspective, it will be helpful to talk about a specific issue that almost everyone agrees is intimately bound up with moral questions. The issue is human rights, a notion that I assume the majority of people in the modern West regard as a foundational idea in our culture. I pose the following question: can a naturalistic morality fund things like human rights and the dignity of persons in a way comparable to a morality rooted in theism? I will argue that it cannot, and as a result, I recommend that we consider finding a place for theistic morality if we wish to maintain these conceptions, such as human rights, in anything other than a *pro forma* fashion.

Following Mark D. Linville, in his essay "The Moral Argument," I take it as a principle of theistic morality that the essential reason why some acts are considered immoral is that they violate the intrinsic rights and dignity of human persons (Linville 442-446). From a theistic viewpoint, God is the objective provider and guarantor of the rights and dignities that all

individuals possess. The reason why murdering, raping, or abusing other persons is morally wrong is that these acts violate the inalienable value and rights of persons, rights inherent simply by virtue of persons being created as beings possessed of intrinsic worth and dignity. God creates persons, i.e., rational and moral creatures who, like God himself, have their own ends and must not simply be regarded by other persons as resources or instruments. To do so would be to violate their nature qua persons, as people whose lives and ability to make choices and pursue goals are God's gifts (444-445).

That being said, the question that should next be raised is whether a like conception of persons is available to the committed naturalist. On the assumption that the universe is for all intents and purposes equivalent to a cosmic accident, without any objective purpose or value, the question becomes how objective purpose and value can ever emerge at any stage of its development. As Linville states, "the naturalist's obstacles in accounting for the dignity of persons are at least threefold, and they are interlocked: how to derive the personal from the impersonal, how to derive values from a previously valueless universe, and how to unite the personal and the valuable with the result of a coherent and plausible notion of personal dignity" (443). We have already stated how theism manages to do this: for theism the personal and the valuable are not things that inexplicably emerge from a universe lacking these qualities, but rather they are there from the beginning, and their being united is a result of their having God as their ground, source, and highest exemplar. The moral order is not something inexplicable that is added on to the physical order, but a part of a total order that has been present in God's person and providence from the beginning. The dignity of human persons is thus extant from the beginning, existing in the person of God, from whom the dignity of all other persons is derived as a gift.

Stated like this, it may seem quite evident that the conception of persons as explained by theism is logically unobtainable by any naturalistic conception of ethics. I believe that such immediate impressions are substantially representative of the reality of the matter. Naturalism is forced to be reductionist about things like personality and value, because they imagine a nascent universe bereft of these things. As a result, notions like intrinsic rights and dignity must, on pain of being inconsistent, be dismissed or redefined in some other way. But to do either is to acknowledge that they don't really exist, but are merely social constructions.

Do we wish to think that human rights are social constructions? That is the unavoidable question with which we are faced. Thomas Jefferson, in *The Declaration of Independence*, is quite clear that human rights are natural rights, and that natural rights are God-given rights. In contrast, we find today the dominating viewpoint of utilitarianism; it forms the *de rigeur* ethics for modern atheism. What did Jeremy Bentham, the founder of utilitarianism, have to say about human rights? He states that "there are no such things as natural rights—no such things as rights anterior to the establishment of government—no such things as natural rights opposed to, in contradistinction to, legal [rights]" (Bentham 500). In Bentham's view, rights are the result of contingent social arrangements, and do not precede them. According to Bentham, an act is wrong not because it violates someone's intrinsic or natural rights (e.g. the right of human beings at all times and in all places not to be murdered or raped) but only because the extant social order is such that deeds like murder and rape have been deemed violations of the social contract. In other words, the only thing that makes my murdering someone wrong is that the society that I live in has determined to consider it so. Were my society to decide differently about what murder is or what it consists of, then the definition of rights would have to be reinterpreted. Perhaps on the new interpretation, six million Jews would have no rights.

For anyone who insists upon an intrinsic conception of human rights, which would see violations of these natural rights as stemming directly from the way that people are themselves wronged by such violations, and which would eschew any understanding of human rights as having a merely pragmatic or contingent origin, it is evident that utilitarianism, in spite of its popularity, is unacceptable. For people who find themselves so disposed, theism, as the ground of a non-contingent moral order that establishes intrinsic value for all human persons, is the only real alternative, one that demands consideration by anyone who has an interest in preserving a conception of human rights and dignity as inherent in all human persons, regardless of circumstances or vicissitudes of history.

I will now sum up what I take to be the upshot of this section. Assuming that order in nature is necessary for the objectivity of empirical assertions, I see no reason not to think that a principle of order is similarly fundamental for the objectivity of all assertions. Truth, since the time of the Greeks, has been understood to be the correspondence of an assertion with reality. If there is no reality to which the assertion can correspond, then the basis of that objectivity is unfounded. All judgments that do not correspond to reality are by definition false. And so if there is no objective moral order to which moral assertions correspond, then no moral assertion can possibly be true—all will be opinion, statements of preference no different than those that apply to any other arena of subjective taste. There may still be prescriptions about what one should do (indeed all naturalistic moral theories have prescriptions) but these will not in fact be moral assertions, precisely because there are no moral facts to which they can correspond. Without a theistic foundation, we are left with something other than, and less than, morality; namely the forced and contractual agreement among persons to behave in certain ways with respect to one another. The objective wrongness of actions no longer exists. What is “wrong” with murder, or rape, is that the contract is breached, not that the act of murder or rape is committed. And even the breach of said contract is only “wrong” because the power exists to enforce it.

It is very important in discussions of morality to be extremely frank about the consequences of what happens when theistic morality goes missing. Can a naturalistic ethics accomplish what a conception of morality tied to theism can achieve? No. Can it provide a meaning for morality as rich and robust as can be provided theistic ethics? No. Is it forced to argue that morality is simply a way that contingent power relations between groups and individuals are managed and negotiated? Yes. Does morality then become something other than morality under such conditions? Yes. Does it, if understood as an unbending guide to timelessly right action, go missing? Yes. As I believe has been demonstrated in this section, it is quite easy to illuminate the shape that morality finds itself in without God. That shape, unfortunately, is no shape at all.

Conclusion

The previous four sections have attempted to show, in various ways, how secularism has impacted and continues to impact our culture. The uniform message has been that when religion disappears or is severely weakened in its influence, society changes for the worse in many un-embraceable ways. It has been argued that all problems are at bottom moral and religious problems. This means that not only are political, social, pedagogical, and economic problems are at root moral and religious problems, but that the solution to these putatively “secular” problems will only be available to those who believe in moral and religious norms. Absent of transcendent principles, the modern West is in a sorry state, rootless, wandering, unsure of what it is, what it

wants, what it should permit, and what it stands for. Without moral and religious norms, the result is cultural oblivion, for morality and religion alone give to a culture its most precious attribute, namely its memory of its own identity.

Notes

1 This book was originally published in 1947 from three Riddell Memorial lectures which Lewis gave on February 24-26, 1943 at the University of Durham. Lewis and his brother traveled during the middle of World War II to deliver the orations. This was the fifteenth lecture given as part of the Riddell series. They were established to honor the memory of Sir John Walter Buchanan-Riddell and usually discussed the “decline in modern times of belief in an objective natural law and a correspondence epistemology” (Travers 108).

2 Lewis lists a few examples from the English textbook that are surreptitiously taught by the authors as moral approvals and disapprovals under the guise of a grammar lesson: Disapprovals: . . . ‘To call a man a coward tell us really nothing about what he does. . . .’ Feelings about a country or empire are feelings ‘about nothing in particular. . . .’ Approvals: Those who prefer the arts of peace to the arts of war (it is not said in what circumstances) are such that ‘we may want to call them ‘wise men. . . .’ ‘Contact with the ideas of other people is, as we know, healthy.’ (Abolition 41)

3 Lewis argues against moral relativism and shows that throughout time, people have held to a universal moral law. He is not arguing necessarily for a Judeo-Christian or narrowly Christian moral code; instead, it is a moral code (the “Tao”) inherent in all human beings. He augments this argument with evidence in his appendix, which lists many examples of Natural Law and uses many ancient traditions to prove his point of a universal law. The titles themselves display the types of truths he argues are part of the Natural Law or Tao as he calls it: “The Law of General Beneficence,” “The Law of Special Beneficence,” “Duties to Parents, Elders, Ancestors,” “Duties to Children and Posterity,” “The Law of Justice,” “The Law of Good Faith and Veracity,” “The Law of Mercy,” and “The Law of Magnanimity.” For example, in the first part of the appendix, he cites several ancient sources who believe murder is wrong and the murderer evil-- Ancient Jewish, Hindu, Babylonian, Ancient Chinese, Ancient Egyptian, Old Norse, and so on (Abolition 97-100).

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