

SAVING THE “SECULAR”

The Public Vocation of Moral Theology¹

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ABSTRACT

The London suicide bombings of July 7, 2005 were partly the revolt of moral earnestness against a liberal society that, enchanted by the fantasy of rationalist anthropology, surrenders its passionate members to a degrading consumerism. The “humane” liberalism variously espoused by Jürgen Habermas, John Rawls, and Jeffrey Stout offers a dignifying alternative; but it is fragile, and each of its proponents looks for allies among certain kinds of religious believer. Stanley Hauerwas, however, counsels Christians against cooperation. On the one hand, he is right to resist, insofar as liberalism illiberally excludes theology from public discourse. On the other hand, not all humane liberalism does this: Stout’s, for example, is genuinely polyglot, requiring not a common secularist language but a common ethic of communicating. Such a liberal ethic and its attendant anthropology merit the support of Christians: there may be more to be said about the Kingdom of God than respect, tolerance, and fairness, but there will not be less. The Christian has good theological reasons to expect some concord with other inhabitants of secular space. Ethical distinctiveness is no measure of theological integrity; and neither theology (*pace* Barth) nor biblical narrative (*pace* Richard Hays) should be expected to do all of the ethical running. If Christians are to be thorough in their moral theology and intelligible in their public statements, then they must borrow non-theological material, formulate abstract concepts, and engage in casuistical analysis. Nevertheless, if an anxious insistence on distinctiveness is a mistake, concern for theological integrity is not. When the moral theologian borrows ethical material from elsewhere, he should integrate it into a theological vision structured by the Christian salvation-historical narrative, which will sometimes modify the meaning of what is incorporated. So in affirming humane, polyglot liberalism, the moral theologian will at the same time make salutary qualifications. One of these is the assertion of the need of liberal institutions to own and promote their moral and

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anthropological commitments. In such a confessionally liberal society, universities in general, and the Arts and Humanities in particular, would recover their vocation to form citizens in communicative virtues and to offer them a dignifying, morally serious vision of human being that could save future generations from a degrading consumerism on the one hand and violent over-reaction on the other.

KEY WORDS: *liberalism, public reason, secularity, moral theology, Christian narrative, casuistry, university*

1. Misreading Humanity: Rationalist and Consumerist Liberalism

The suicide bombers of July 7, 2005 were not wholly wrong. They were wrong in what they did; but they were not wholly wrong in why they did it. Their motives were mixed, but among them was moral disgust—disgust at the obsession with the consumption of material goods, which, they felt, characterized the culture enveloping them. In the videotape that he left behind, Mohammad Sidique Khan was scathing about the British media’s administering materialism to the masses, and he asserted that “*our* driving agenda doesn’t come from tangible commodities that this world has to offer” (Cowell 2005). Moreover, maybe it was no coincidence that, before he turned politically radical, Khan was involved in helping young Asian drug addicts kick their habit (Malik 2007, 31); maybe the road to cathartic violence went through his direct experience of the degrading symptoms of a popular culture that much prefers being out of one’s mind to being in it.

Now, of course, playing cultural Cassandra is the traditional role of every generation of aging Tories. However, here the decriers of moral degeneration are young, and they now attract murmurs of sympathy from the Left. Two years ago Timothy Garton Ash wrote in *The Guardian* that

Britain now has one of the most libertine societies in Europe. Particularly among younger Brits in urban areas, which is where most British Muslims live, we drink more alcohol faster, sleep around more, live less in long-lasting, two parent families, and worship less, than almost anyone in the world. It’s clear from what young British Muslims themselves say that part of their reaction is against this kind of secular, hedonistic, anomic lifestyle. . . . The idea that these young British Muslims might actually be putting their fingers on some things that are wrong with our modern, progressive, liberal, secular society . . . hardly feature[s] in everyday progressive discourse. But [it] should [2006, 25].

This, believe it or not, comes from a card-carrying liberal of the Isaiah Berlin variety.

We do need to be circumspect here. Those of us with Puritan tendencies, or at least who think ourselves morally serious, should heed Stephen Clark's warning that "history suggests that idealists, not ordinary sensualists nor even ordinary, muddled human animals, do the most harm" (1990, 80). Indeed, it was moral idealists, not party animals, who were moved to explode bombs—and themselves—on the London underground.

Nevertheless, there is harm and there is harm. There is blatant, explosive harm; and there is subtle harm, which is no less real for being harder to detect. Sometimes the latter can cause the former. A liberal society that gives commercial interests free rein to seduce its citizens into believing that buying novelties, status, or pleasure will satisfy does double harm, for it at once overestimates and underestimates its people.

It overestimates its people by deferring to the persistent fantasy of Enlightenment philosophers that human beings are rational individuals, who are fully aware of their own best interests and are perfectly capable of deciding for themselves how they should be served. However, reflection on twentieth-century history in particular, if not on human life as experienced in general, surely furnishes ample evidence that human beings are alarmingly susceptible to being spellbound and driven by self-destructive passions. Whether or not he is responsible for the Christian Church's tendency to equate original sin with concupiscence, St. Augustine was not wrong, I think, to use (male) sexual desire as a prime example of the relative fatedness of human existence—of the extent to which human beings are considerably, if not absolutely, driven by physical, psychic, and social forces of which they have little understanding, and over which they have even less control. Quite why the myth of the rational individual has persisted so long is hard to understand—except, of course, that it panders to human vanity and it is useful to those who would sell us things by exploiting our passions. That is why this rationalist overestimation is harmful, for in the name of the "free market" and its "rational consumers" it denudes us of social protection against those who would make money out of exciting our anxieties and desires.

Rationalist overestimation is one of the harms that liberal society, as we currently have it, does to its members. Consumerist underestimation is another. Human beings are more than their hedonic appetites and aversions. They yearn—and are called—to invest themselves in something intrinsically worthwhile that will endow their passing lives with permanent meaning. Such is the exalted view, not just of Christianity, but also of the other Abrahamic monotheisms, and of certain strains of liberalism. Accordingly, in a culture where specifically human aspirations tend to be trampled underfoot in the stampede for

pleasure—or anesthesia—one would expect humanity to rebel; and given a supporting ill wind, one would fear that rebellion might turn radical and even violent.

This speculative fear is given empirical corroboration by an event in the career of another radical Islamist. In 1993, Ed Husain was spearheading a campaign to “Islamise” public space in Tower Hamlets College—by holding public prayers, plastering the walls with Islamist posters, and encouraging women to wear the hijab. The college authorities grew alarmed and considered how best to combat the growing influence of Muslim radicalism. According to their best lights, they decided to try and divert students by holding raves and discos. The result was telling. Husain recounts it:

In early 1993, a thirty-minute video was handed in to me about the war in Bosnia, the ethnic cleansing of Muslims in the Balkans. I watched it in horror and then decided that it must be shown to our students to raise money for Bosnian Muslims.

On Wednesday afternoon we booked a lecture theatre under the title of “The Killing Fields of Bosnia”. . . . That same Wednesday afternoon the youth workers at college organized their second disco. . . . The Islamic society offered a video on the killing of Muslims by Christians. The youth workers offered dance, drugs, and delight.

To our astonishment the lecture theatre was packed. The students had voted with their feet. . . . [2007, 63, 74].

Radical Islamism had dignified the students with moral seriousness. The college authorities, on the other hand, had nothing either humanly or morally serious to offer as an alternative. No doubt acting on what passes for liberal common sense, they had dramatically underestimated the humanity of their students; consequently, their ability to counter the growing appeal of a humanly dignifying radicalism was hamstrung.

2. Humane Liberalism Looks for Religious Allies

Liberalism, of course, is not one thing—in spite of what most of its Christian theological detractors would have us believe. It is as many things as there are different kinds of freedom. The liberalism that presses for increasingly untrammelled markets, and treats rational individuals primarily as rational consumers, is only one of several. Others dignify human beings with a rationality that is not just the canny servant of the individual’s appetite for pleasure and aversion to pain, but rather is one that admires the beauty of human dignity and acknowledges the obligations of justice that emanate from it. These are what I will call the “humane” liberalisms of eminent contemporary philosophers such as Jürgen Habermas, John Rawls, and Jeffrey Stout,

who stand in a tradition that reaches back to J. S. Mill, Immanuel Kant, and John Locke. Their liberalisms envision a society whose members recognize each other as equals, who respect the freedom of others to think as seems best to them, who engage earnestly and sympathetically with contrary points of view, who give and take reasons, and who negotiate provisional agreements. This is a society where relations between members are governed by definite moral commitments and the exercise of moral virtues such as tolerance, fairness, reasonableness, and civility.

Such a liberal society is, of course, an ideal. However, when Habermas envisages public consensus arising out of *each* citizen entering *fully* into the perspectives of *all* others (1998, 58), one could be forgiven for wondering whether it is, in fact, ludicrously idealistic. Even in less utopian—or eschatological—forms this liberal ideal of public deliberation might well look at home only in institutions of higher learning, where the process of understanding is shielded from the pressures of political decision making. On the other hand, maybe here the academy has something valuable—if not economic—to give the rest of society. Maybe an ideal that can be most easily realized in universities could find approximations in parliament, the media, and other reaches of civil society—not excluding churches or mosques. Maybe everyone would be better off if it did—not least because the alternative is a more unfair, a more resentful, and a more strife-ridden society.

How far we will succeed in approximating the humane liberal ideal—or even in preserving what we have of it—is not at all certain. Indeed, much of the relevant work of Habermas, Rawls, and Stout has been motivated by an anxious awareness of how fragile and vulnerable is the humanely liberal character of contemporary Western societies.² Authoritarian or fundamentalist religion is the predictable choice for the role of primary menace, and until quite recently, Habermas has not disappointed on this score.³ Rawls and Stout are more even-handed in their anxieties, readily acknowledging threats from nonreligious dogmatists as well as religious ones. All three are concerned about the

² Rawls, for example, recognizes that there will always be views that would suppress liberty of conscience—"unreasonable" comprehensive doctrines—and there is no guarantee that they will not prevail (1996, 65, 126), as they did in the case of the Weimar Republic (1999, lxi–lxii.). The virtues of tolerance, of being ready to meet others halfway, of reasonableness, and of fairness comprise political capital that can depreciate and constantly needs to be renewed (1999, 157 n. 23). Consequently, he tells us, "The problem of stability has been on our minds from the outset" (1999, 141), and the main task is to secure toleration and strengthen the ties of civic trust or friendship (1999, 155; 1996, 86).

³ For most of his career Habermas has read "religion" in typical Enlightenment terms as the authoritarian enemy of modern, liberal society. Since at least 2001, however, his view of "religion" has become more nuanced and more positive.

ability of commercial corporations to use their financial power to advance their economic interests at the expense of liberal public deliberation (Rawls 1996, 360–61; Habermas 2005a, 112; and Stout 2004, 305). To these various worries I would add a further one: the power of consumerist culture to malform citizens. A culture that daily stirs up citizens' obsession with self-gratification trains them in selfishness, greed, incontinence, and impatience; and it renders them accordingly incapable of the self-restraint and self-transcendence—the generosity—necessary for humane liberal dealings. It might be that liberal instruction from parents and lectures in citizenship from teachers will curb these consumerist vices. Nevertheless, sweet reason alone is a very feeble thing in the face of habitually entrenched, and daily excited, passions.

However one interprets the threats facing the humane liberal ideal, it is remarkable that all three of its contemporary philosophical advocates (none of them, curiously, British) see certain forms of religion as important allies in its defense. Habermas has come late to this view, but on several occasions since the turn of the millennium he has spoken of religious traditions as having a “superior capacity for articulating our [presumably liberal] moral sensibility” (2002, vii). Some years before that, in his theory of “political liberalism,” Rawls had already recognized that a liberal ethos, and the view of human beings it requires, can be supported by a limited range of worldviews—or “comprehensive doctrines,” as he calls them—and that this range includes certain religious ones. Stout's work, as I understand it, is basically an elaboration of Rawls's,⁴ and fully shares this assumption.

3. Against Secular Language

The humane liberal ideal is vulnerable and under threat. Some of its most eminent philosophical advocates are looking to religious communities, not least Christian churches, for support. Should they give it? The most influential Christian moral theologian living and working in the English-speaking world, Stanley Hauerwas, says not. He has

⁴ In my view, Rawls differs from Stout less than Stout (in *Democracy and Tradition*) thinks. This is because, as I read him, Rawls the philosopher of “political liberalism” is coherently expressivist, notwithstanding vestigial Kantian elements. Accordingly, he is incipiently aware that public reason is internally controversial, because diverse comprehensive doctrines inevitably operate in the interpretation of common political values and public goods. Stout does the good service of making clear what Rawls merely implies: that public reason cannot expect to be purged of the effects of theological premises. As I see it, then, the distance between Stout and Rawls is one of length rather than breadth. See my forthcoming essay, “Not Translation, but Conversation: Theology in Public Debate about Euthanasia” (n.d.[b]).

written that Christians have no stake in the continuation of Western civilization (1985, 40), and that they "would be ill advised to try to rescue the liberal project either in its epistemological or political form" (1991, 35). One of his main reasons for taking this position is that he rejects "the presumption that Christians in the name of being players in so-called liberal or pluralist societies should downplay the way of life that makes us Christians" (2000, 325). Here, Hauerwas alludes to an important point. It belongs to most of liberal political orthodoxy that religious believers should drop their peculiar God-talk—their theology, loosely speaking—whenever they venture to speak in public. In the public spaces of a society whose members hold to a plurality of religious and nonreligious views of human life and its cosmic context, religious people should speak the common, "secular" language. This was a view propounded by Rawls, who is arguably the pre-eminent political theorist of recent times; and it is still the view propounded by Habermas, arguably the most influential political philosopher working on the European continent. Even though, since the turn of the millennium, Habermas has become noticeably more appreciative of what religious traditions bring to public discussion, he still insists that what religious people have to say should be "translated" into accessible, secular language (2002, vii; 2005b, 136). Likewise, despite Rawls's recognition that some religious worldviews are among those that support a liberal ethos, his late writings still maintain that the final discourse of parliament, law courts, and elections to public office should be that of "public reason"—that is, a neutral, autonomous language whose terms are supposed somehow to float free of the larger particular doctrines that make ultimate sense of them (1996, li–lii; 1999, 144, 152–56).

Insofar as this is what Hauerwas objects to in "the liberal project," I think that he is right to resist it. The doctrinaire exclusion of theology from public discourse is insupportable. "Secular" language, in this exclusive sense, is not neutral; it discriminates specifically against theology. Habermas insists on it because he himself assumes that modern science has rendered theology incredible, and that atheism alone is rational. (I see no sign that he has read Arthur Peacocke, Keith Ward, or Alister McGrath.) He also assumes that the overwhelming majority of citizens in democratic societies agree with him, and that therefore the minority who persist in their obsolete religious beliefs should have the decency to defer to it. However, as so often with contemporary modernists, what is presented as simply and universally "rational" is actually only an atheist's construal; and what is presented as democratically obliging fact is actually only an assertion of progressivist faith. Habermas is convinced that other citizens would agree with his atheism, were they rational, and that they will agree once

Historical Progress has made them so. The problem is that, as things now stand, most of them do not agree. Obviously not in the United States, but not even in the United Kingdom, which is often assumed to be one of Europe's most secular countries. Here, self-confessed atheists remain a small minority. The vast majority of people claim to believe in some kind of God, even though most of them seldom, if ever, darken the door of a church, a synagogue, or a mosque.⁵ Most of us hover somewhere between certain belief and certain unbelief. We are not "secular," in the sense of being predominantly atheist; rather, we are just unsure and mixed up. Some believe more than they do not; others do not believe more than they do; and of those who believe somewhat, not all are self-evidently unreasonable. So insofar as the prescription of secular language for public discourse rests on an appeal to a democratic majority, it falls; and insofar as it rests on an assumption that only atheism is rational, and that contrary views are too vulgar to be taken seriously, it is illiberal.

Why, then, should theological references uniquely suffer ban from public conversation? Why should Aristotelians, Hobbesians, Marxists, Nietzscheans, and Social Darwinists be allowed to say what they mean in their own terms, but not orthodox Jews or Christians or Muslims? Is the speech of, say, a Christian intrinsically more "inaccessible" to non-Christians, than that of a Kantian to Utilitarians, or that of a Heideggerian to the disciples of A. J. Ayer? It is true that, were religious interventions to take the form of bald appeals to the Bible or invocations of the Pope, unsupported by any explanatory reasoning, then they would be bound to baffle those for whom neither the Bible nor the Pope are authorities. Religious people, however, are not the only ones capable of being rhetorically gauche or bullying. Marxists and Fascists have been known to, as more recently have some celebrity atheists. Further, if it is true that religious interventions can be authoritarian and dogmatic, it is also true that they need not be so. As witness I call one prominent political philosopher, Jeremy Waldron:

Secular theorists often assume that they know what a religious argument is like: they present it as a crude prescription from God, backed up with

⁵ See Grace Davie 1994, *passim* but especially p. 2: "Why is it, for example, that the majority of British people—in common with many other Europeans—persist in believing (if only in an ordinary God), but see no need to participate with even minimal regularity in their religious institutions? Indeed most people in this country—whatever their denominational allegiance—express their religious sentiments by staying away from, rather than going to, their places of worship. On the other hand, relatively few British people have opted out of religion altogether: out and out atheists are rare." According to Table 5.1, a survey in 1990 showed that 71% of British people believe in "God" (1994, 78). In Davie 2002, she cites a survey conducted ten years later (1999/2000). The percentage of British people who believe in "God" was virtually unchanged at 71.6% (2002, 7).

threat of hellfire, derived from general or particular revelation, and they contrast it with the elegant simplicity of a philosophical argument by Rawls (say) or Dworkin. With this image in mind, they think it obvious that religious argument should be excluded from public life. . . . But those who have bothered to make themselves familiar with existing religious-based arguments in modern political theory know that this is mostly a travesty . . . [2002, 20].

It is possible for a religious contribution to public discussion to be reasonable. What does this mean? Certainly it means that religious believers will not just cite authorities and make theological references without also proceeding to furnish explanations and reasons that have been crafted to persuade a skeptical audience. To consider how your auditors might receive what you say, and then to offer an explanation, is to pay them a certain respect; and if love for one's neighbors involves more than respect, it does not, I think, involve less. More substantively, a theological contribution that is reasonable will not invoke divine commandments without taking care to explain these in terms of their service of human flourishing and the goods that comprise it. If it is true that the Sabbath was made for Man and not Man for the Sabbath, then moral prescriptions find their point in the defense and promotion of human goods. Indeed, it is from the intrinsic value of those goods that moral law—and divine commands—draw their obliging force.

The fact that theological contributions to public discussion can be reasonable does not mean that they will always be "accessible"—in the sense of immediately or entirely comprehended. After all, moments and degrees of non-comprehension are ordinary features of human conversation. Sometimes what I think should make sense to you (if only you were not so benighted), you think is nonsense. For sure, such moments bring conversation to a temporary halt; but there are perfectly familiar ways of getting it going again ("So *why exactly* do you think that what I've said is nonsense?" or "Let me reformulate what I've just said, and let's see if you *still* think it's nonsense" or "Okay, so we've reached an impasse at *this* point. Let's see if we can make progress at another one"). As it happens, I think that what Habermas says about "secular" language makes no sense, and I doubt that it could make sense, unless he were to say something quite different. What Habermas has said is not accessible to me. So should we ban it from public conversation? Of course not.

Nevertheless, maybe what is not comprehended can still be "accessible" in another sense: that I can take the nonsense (as I reckon it) you have spoken, ferret out some valid reasons why you might have said it, and then offer an alternative expression of them that makes more sense to me. In other words, I can make some sense out of the nonsense you seem to have spoken, but in *different* terms—in *different* language.

You might, of course, reject my reformulation, or you might accept it with qualifications, or you might simply accept it. Whatever your reaction, our conversation could well continue—in spite of the fact that at least two sets of terms, two languages, are in play. What is important is *not* that we all speak the same “secular” language, nor that what we say to each other is accessible in the sense of immediately comprehensible. What is important is that we *want* to reach a common understanding of the truth, that we are prepared to explain how and why we see things as we do, that we are open to honest negotiation, and that we are inclined to exercise charity in our construction and reconstruction of each other’s point of view. In sum, what matters is not the *language* of public discourse, but the *manner* of its conduct—and the motives and intentions that drive it.

4. Humane, Polyglot Liberalism is also Christian

Rawls and Habermas are wrong, therefore, to insist that religious believers confine their theology to private discourse and adopt secular language in public; and Hauerwas is right to resist even humane liberalism on this point. Nonetheless, humane liberalism, too, is more than one thing—as has been shown by my immediate predecessor, Oliver O’Donovan, surely one of the most distinguished incumbents of the Regius Chair of Moral and Pastoral Theology since its foundation in 1842. Through his magisterial tracking of the development of modern political thought out of the matrix of a biblically informed Christendom, O’Donovan reached a position in his 2003 Bampton Lectures of being able to distinguish early modern “monotheistic” liberalism from what he called “denatured late liberalism” (2005, 75, 76). This illuminating distinction is susceptible to further elaboration, for not all late liberalism is equally denatured. Not all of it, for example, involves the secularist exclusion from public discourse of theology—and so of appeals to transcendent moral order. In Stout’s hands, for example, late humane liberalism can conceive public space as one where a plurality of voices—not least theological ones—make themselves heard in their own terms, and where each treats the other with respect as they give and take reasons, identify areas of overlap, negotiate points of difference, and reach provisional agreements (Stout 2004, 10–11, 72, 73, 79–80, 85, 90, 112). What this polyglot liberalism requires is not a single tongue, but a responsible manner—not so much public reason as public reasonableness. This amounts to an ethic of communication, and it depends on a certain anthropology, namely, a view of human beings as endowed with a special dignity—the dignity of beings who are equal in their capacity to open themselves to what is good, to discern what is right, and to bear witness to them.

Although Rawls was wrong to think that public discourse should be conducted in secular language, and that this could somehow be neutral, he was nevertheless right to suppose that a humane liberal anthropology and ethic could (and should) elicit support from certain religious worldviews, not least Christian ones. There may be more to be said about the Kingdom of God, but there will not be less. Respect for human fellows as potential prophets, and consequent tolerance of their strange utterances—these dispositions are Christian virtues, too. If fairness is not the whole of the law and the prophets, then the Golden Rule suggests that it is part of it. Moreover, public space where diverse believers and unbelievers negotiate provisional agreement about public goods is the original secularity of St. Augustine's vision of political life during the *saeculum*, the ambiguous age between the promise of the Resurrection and its fulfillment in the Eschaton, the age when the wheat dare not be told from the tares. Humane, polyglot liberalism belongs to Christian moral theology, too.

5. The Drive for Distinctiveness and the Short-Circuiting of Casuistry

Quite why Hauerwas and other moral theologians resist this measure of Christian accommodation to liberalism is not clear. It might be because they hold Christianity to be pacifist and associate "the liberal project" with crusading wars. That would be odd, however, because some forms of liberalism are famously squeamish about any use of force. So why do moral theologians fail to spot the differences? Is it the fruit of a dualistic habit of thought, which, when it looks around, only ever sees undifferentiated (and idealized) "Church" versus undifferentiated (and denigrated) "World"? This, however, begs the question, Why the habit? Does it issue, ironically, from an all too worldly anxiety about identity, self-definition, and boundaries?

Whatever the causes, resistance to accommodation with humane, polyglot, Augustinian liberalism is a mistake. The Christian theologian has good theological reasons to expect that not everything that unbelievers affirm must he deny. Since he believes that the world is the creation of a single divine intelligence, he assumes that it is marked by a coherent order and is therefore comprehensible. Further, since he believes that the divine intelligence is benevolent, he assumes that the world's comprehensible order includes values, or goods, or forms of flourishing—that is, the basic elements of so-called "natural law." Further still, unless he supposes that sinful estrangement from God has entirely corrupted the ability of unbelievers to recognize created goods, and to discern how human conduct might best serve them, then he should not be surprised when fellow citizens who do not share his

theological convictions nevertheless converge upon some of his moral views. Moreover, unless he is oblivious to his own sinfulness, and unless he takes all unbelief at face value, then he will also not be surprised to find from time to time that apparent unbelievers have a thing or two to teach him.

The fact that a theological view of an ethic of public communication will not always differ from other views should not be a cause for alarm. Distinctiveness is no measure of integrity. Whether a moral theological proposal is distinctive depends entirely on the happenstance of context—what one happens to be talking about, and with whom. One should not assume that all unbelievers will balk at it—any more than one should assume that all believers will embrace it. In his wiser, less polemical moments even Karl Barth admitted that theology alone cannot generate all the material needed for a complete Christian ethic. As the Israelites took possession of Canaan, he wrote, so must theology “annex” non-theological ethics. Indeed, Barth defied his own stereotype by going as far as to say that “finally and properly [moral theology’s] own Whence? and Whither? are not alien to any philosophic moralist,” and that therefore it will be “absolutely open to all that it can learn from general human ethical enquiry and reply” (1957, 524). The implication is clear: moral theology will contain—must contain—material that can be found elsewhere. It will not always be distinctive.

Nevertheless, much contemporary moral theology continues to be driven by an anxious concern to assert its distinctiveness. Not only does this prevent a careful and fair evaluation of liberalism; not only does it obscure liberal elements that Christians ought to affirm; it also erects a stumbling block in public discussion. Too often moral theologians baffle, not by being theological, but by short-circuiting their moral arguments. Too often, driven by an anxiety to show how much ethical work theology can do, they move with excessive haste from theological affirmation to moral conclusion. An infamous instance of this is Barth’s argument that since “the Church lives from the disclosure of the true God and His revelation,” it follows as “an inevitable political corollary . . . that the Church is the sworn enemy of all . . . secret diplomacy” (1968, 176)! We see the premise. We see the conclusion. We hear the *assertion* of logical necessity. What we miss is the moral analysis of different kinds of openness, methodically demonstrating that God’s openness in Jesus Christ really is the opposite of, say, the British Government’s lack of openness about its negotiations with the I.R.A. Less of a straw man but still problematic are those contemporary arguments—be they from conservative Roman Catholics such as Germain Grisez or from Lutherans such as Martin Honecker—that since the theological doctrines of creation, the Incarnation, and the Resurrection all affirm that bodiliness is valuable and essential to

human being, therefore Christians may not distinguish between its "biological" and "personal" dimensions, deeming some biologically living human beings to be non-persons (Grisez 1993, 460–69; Honecker 1996, 79). As it stands, this is a non sequitur; for to say that there cannot be a person where there is no body is one thing, but to say that where there is a living human body there is necessarily a person is quite another. That bodies are necessary for persons does not make them sufficient (Biggar 2004, 32–35, 176 n. 45). The theological premises here do not add up to the moral conclusion.

One of the reasons for such weakness in moral theological argumentation, especially in certain reaches of Protestant ethics, is a traditional suspicion of casuistry. Of the several mistaken grounds on which this suspicion rests, the main one is the assumption that casuistry necessarily abstracts the making of moral judgments from its proper, distinctive theological context. This is effectively Richard Hays's position in his book, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, which attracted high praise upon its publication in 1996 and is now widely admired as a classic. Hays shares the view of the Hauerwasian school that moral theology must stick close to the biblical narrative, if it is to remain genuinely Christian. He correctly observes that when ethical concepts are abstracted from that narrative, they are vulnerable to being understood in ways that are alien to fundamental Christian presuppositions (1996, chap. 10). For example, the concept of love means one thing in the light of the Gospel stories of Jesus's crucifixion, but something rather different in the light of the romances of Barbara Cartland. From this, however, Hays wrongly concludes that moral theology may think its way to moral judgments only by drawing "imaginative analogies" directly between the biblical stories and our own situations (1996, 298–304), and *not* by abstracting general principles and then applying them methodically to cases. His error here is to obscure what is actually involved in constructing an apposite analogy. For in order to discern how I should behave here and now in a manner that corresponds to Jesus's conduct during his Passion, I have first of all to decide how to interpret that conduct. I have to try to encapsulate it. Should I read it as a noble act of suicide? Or as an act of love? Or more specifically as an act of self-sacrifice? Or more specifically yet as an act of forbearance and forgiveness? Whatever my interpretation, I cannot avoid abstracting from the story a kind of conduct that is morally normative. That is to say, I cannot avoid analyzing the story into an abstract moral principle. Tellingly, nor does Hays, for while he declines to read the Cross in the vague terms of "love," he nevertheless chooses to read it instead in the more definite terms of "non-violence." Moreover, because he eschews the analysis of abstract concepts in favor of the intuition of "imaginative analogies," he

shields his own abstract principle from critical questioning. Is “non-violence” really the best summary of what Jesus taught and did? Should we not follow St. Paul in making moral distinctions between violence in the service of private interests and lethal force used for the public good (Romans 13:1–4), and between immoderate and moderate anger (Ephesians 4:26)? Furthermore, should we not then specify Jesus as repudiating, not all uses of lethal force under any conceivable circumstance, but specifically the private use of violence in the service of hateful, vengeful, and imprudent nationalist revolt?⁶ Did Jesus really mean to prohibit Tony Blair from sending armed troops to Sierra Leone in order to prevent diamond-greedy, drug-crazed, limb-chopping rebels from seizing control of the country? Is this case really analogous to Jesus’s Passion? Is the kind of violence that Jesus repudiated the same, morally speaking, as that which British soldiers adopted? Hays’s overt eschewal of conceptual abstraction and analysis results in the covert and clumsy operation of a moral norm unrefined by valid moral distinctions. He does not succeed in avoiding casuistry; he just does it in a way that begs all manner of question.

If moral theologians are not to baffle others, if they are to command respect in public, then they need to articulate their arguments all the way from the top to the bottom, all the way from theological premise through moral principle to the careful analysis of cases. The casuistical bottom may be far distant from the theological top, but it need not be alien to it—if the reasoning in between has been sufficiently careful. Another distinguished holder of the Regius Chair of Moral Theology, Kenneth Kirk, provides us with a model. At one end of his oeuvre is his most famous book, *The Vision of God* (1931), and at the other end is his *Conscience and Its Problems: An Introduction to Casuistry* (1927). A moral theology that would answer its public vocation needs to run the full gamut, all the way from the beatific to the casuistic, from the sublime to the meticulous.

6. Sticking to Its Colors: Theology’s Qualification of Secularity

If anxiety about distinctiveness is a mistake, concern for integrity is not. As Karl Barth rightly says, moral theology “must always be absolutely resolved to stick to its colours”; “[it] must not . . . disarm its distinctive Whence? and Whither? in order to assure itself a place in the sun of general ethical discussion” (1957, 524). Such resolve is required by self-respect. It is also required by public responsibility.

⁶ For an explanation of the view behind these rhetorical questions, see my forthcoming “Specify and Distinguish! Interpreting the New Testament on ‘Non-violence’” (n.d.[a]).

Sometimes the moral theologian will have something salutary to say that no one else is saying, and should he fail to say it, the political community will be so much the poorer. When he borrows ethical material from elsewhere—say, from common wisdom or moral philosophy or Jewish ethics—he should integrate it into a theological vision structured by the Christian salvation-historical narrative, which will sometimes significantly modify the meaning of what is incorporated. Suppose, for example, that a theologian endorses the distinction that some utilitarian philosophers make between the biological and the personal dimensions of human life. He agrees that the special value of human life lies in the latter. He also agrees that the life of a human being whose cerebral cortex is so damaged as to put him forever beyond the exercise of personal capabilities does not share in that special value. Nevertheless, the moral theologian might still resist understanding personal life in the subjectivist terms of a capacity for “autonomy,” for arbitrary self-direction, for launching and sustaining “projects” (for example, James Rachels 1986, 5, 64–65; Peter Singer 1993, 192, 182). Instead, he might think of it in terms of “responsibility”—that is, a capacity to respond to goods given in creation, and to a vocation from God. One practical upshot of this is that the moral theologian is more likely than the utilitarian philosopher to recognize the value of the life of a severely handicapped child, who is hardly capable of self-direction or launching projects, but whose face nevertheless lights up in response to the beauty of music (Biggar 2004, 45–47).

Theological premises will not make a difference at every point, but they will make a difference at some. For this reason, I decline to take at face value the statement of one theological colleague that, during his membership of the Ethical Council of Denmark, “not once was my theological background decisive” (“Nicht einmal mein theologischer Hintergrund war entscheidend”) (Andersen 2005, 10). What Svend Andersen means here should be read in the light of his endorsement of the view of his mentor, Knud Løgstrup, that “Christian faith does not imply its own ethic. The ethic of neighbour-love is a universal ethic, which is entirely intelligible in human terms” (“der christliche Glaube gar keine Ethik impliziert. Die Ethik der Nächstenliebe ist eine allgemeine, auch rein human verständliche Ethik”) (Andersen 2005, 11). I do not believe that this is so, except perhaps at a level of bland generality. For the sake of argument, let us ignore the existence of philosophically principled egoists and grant that everyone agrees that we ought to love our neighbor. Once we scrutinize what we suppose we all agree upon, however, a host of controversial questions arise. These will attract a variety of answers, some of them shaped by Christian theological premises. Whom should we consider to be our neighbor? Should we include dolphins, or human fetuses, or hindered human

adults who are not rational in the sense of being capable of self-direction? Assuming that love is about promoting the well-being of the beloved, into which component goods should we analyze that well-being? Is communion with God among them? How should we rank these goods? Should we allow that we may intentionally damage some for the sake of others, and if so, under what conditions? Moreover, when my neighbor's well-being conflicts with my own, should I always sacrifice the latter? If in saying that his theological background had never been "decisive," Andersen means that it had never been *distinctively* formative, then I would infer that he had enjoyed the good fortune of having as colleagues on the Danish Ethical Council only fellow humane liberals—and not, for example, the post-humanist disciples of Peter Singer or John Gray. If, on the other hand, Andersen means that his theology had never been *ethically* formative, then I would infer that he had failed to think thoroughly as a theologian. Sometimes, theological premises will reshape ethical concepts in important ways—when they are given the chance. From time to time, then, the moral theologian must, as my own mentor Jim Gustafson used to intone, "say something theological" (2007, 85–97).

So when the moral theologian comes to the communicative ethic of humane, polyglot liberalism, he will affirm it, but not simply. The peace of Augustinian secularity is not settled but tense.⁷ Below the surface of agreement open up depths of difference. So what the moral theologian affirms, he will also want to qualify. For example, he will want to stiffen the liberal ethic with the grace of an ethical realism, which locates human communication firmly in the context of common responsibility to a moral order given with the created nature of things. Thus will he help to save public negotiation as a rational exercise in discerning together the transcendent truth, and keep it from degenerating into a cynical struggle for power. Thus will he also help to save tolerance as an exercise in careful listening, perchance to learn, and keep it from relaxing into slothful indifference. Most of all, however, will the moral theologian encourage institutions that would be

⁷ On the one hand, according to St. Augustine, secular space is where members of the city of God and members of the earthly city cooperate to maintain and promote common, temporal goods (*City of God* XIX.17). On the other hand, there is no true justice apart from love for God (*City of God* XIX.21). It follows, then, that all secular agreements will be subject to the judgment and the claim of that true justice which is only ever to be found in the eschatological city of God. Secular peace, therefore, is not absolute, but provisional; not settled, but tense. It seems to me that Robert A. Markus's description of such peace as "autonomous" or "neutral" (2006, 40) tends to obscure this unsettled, still contested quality. Members of the two "cities" may agree on certain goods, but they read them differently; and sometimes those different readings will lead to significant conflicts over the small print of law and policy.

humanely liberal to own and articulate their suppressed moral and anthropological commitments. If public discourse is to become and to remain reasonable, then would-be liberal institutions will have to learn again to confess and to propagate a particular set of values and moral norms. They will have to acknowledge the need to foster a humane anthropology and a liberal ethic among their members.

7. Forming the Virtues of Public Discourse: Moral Theology and University Education

Among the would-be liberal institutions that moral theology could help remoralize are universities. In a society that is serious about being humanely liberal, moral formation would be a primary aim of university education. If it were, the Arts and Humanities would not find it so difficult to articulate to Government what they are good for. The Arts and Humanities in general, and Theology in particular, do citizens the good of introducing them to foreign worlds and teaching them to treat them well. They introduce us to worlds made strange by the passage of time and to present worlds structured by the peculiar grip of unfamiliar languages—worlds alien to us in their social organization and manners, their religious and philosophical convictions. They teach us to read strange and intractable texts with patience and care, to meet alien ideas and practices with humility, docility, and charity, to draw alongside foreign worlds before we set about—as we must—judging them. The Arts and Humanities train us in the practice of honest dialogue, which respects the foreigner as a potential prophet, one who might yet speak a new word about what is true and good and beautiful.

A commitment to the truth, humility, a readiness to be taught, patience, carefulness, charity: all of these are moral virtues that inform the intellectual discipline into which the Arts and Humanities induct their students; all of these are moral virtues of which public discourse, whether in the media or in Parliament, displays no obvious surplus; all of these are moral virtues without which Britain may get to become an "innovation economy," but will not get to become a "wisdom society." What is more, public decisions that, being unwise, are careless with the truth, arrogant, unteachable, uncharitable, impatient, and imprudently optimistic will be bad decisions—and bad decisions cause needless damage to real institutions and real individuals.

And who knows, they could even cost money.

Moral theology can certainly help the Arts and Humanities to own and confess their human and moral commitments. Further, if Habermas is correct about the superior capacity of religious traditions to articulate liberal intuitions, and if those other atheist philosophers are correct who reckon that talk about human dignity without

theological reference is so much whistling in the dark,⁸ then maybe moral theology is actually better equipped to help. What is at stake here, however, is far more than enabling the Arts and Humanities to articulate their public *raison d'être*. What is at stake is enabling the likes of Tower Hamlets College—and Oxford University—to offer a dignifying, morally serious vision of human being that could save future generations of citizens from a degrading consumerism on the one hand, and violent over-reaction on the other.

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⁸ For example, Jeffrie Murphy 1988, 239: “[For me it is] very difficult—perhaps impossible—to embrace religious convictions,” and yet “the liberal theory of rights requires a doctrine of human dignity, preciousness and sacredness that cannot be utterly detached from a belief in God or at least from a world view that would be properly called religious in some metaphysically profound sense” (When Murphy wrote this, he was an atheist. According to correspondence in 2006 with the author of this essay, that is no longer the case); and Raimond Gaita 2000, 5: “The secular philosophical tradition speaks of inalienable rights, inalienable dignity and of persons as ends in themselves. These are, I believe, ways of whistling in the dark, ways of trying to make secure to reason what reason cannot finally underwrite. Religious traditions speak of the sacredness of each human being, but I doubt that sanctity is a concept that has a secure home outside those traditions.”

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