A Clash of Orthodoxies

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A few years ago, the eminent Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington published in *Foreign Affairs* a widely noted article called "The Clash of Civilizations." Looking at contemporary international relations from a geopolitical vantage point, he predicted a clash of the world's major civilizations: the West, the Islamic world, and the Confucian East. Huntington's article provoked a response from one of his own most brilliant former students—Swarthmore's James Kurth. In an article in the *National Interest* entitled "The Real Clash," Kurth argued persuasively that the clash that is coming—and has, indeed, already begun—is not so much among the world's great civilizations as it is within the civilization of the West, between those who claim the Judeo–Christian worldview and those who have abandoned that worldview in favor of the "isms" of contemporary American life—feminism, multiculturalism, gay liberationism, lifestyle liberalism—what I here lump together as a family called "the secularist orthodoxy."

This clash of worldviews is sometimes depicted (though not by Professor Kurth) as a battle between the forces of "faith" and those of "reason." I propose to challenge this depiction in a particular and fundamental way. I shall argue that the Christian moral view is rationally defensible. Indeed, my claim is that Christian moral teaching can be shown to be rationally superior to orthodox secular moral beliefs.

In defending the rational strength of Christian morality, I do not mean either to denigrate faith or to deny the importance—indeed, the centrality—of God's revealed Word in the Bible, or of sacred Christian tradition. My aim is to offer a philosophical defense of Christian morality, and to put forward a challenge to the secularist worldview that has established itself as an orthodoxy in the academy and other elite sectors of Western culture.

First, let's get clear what is at stake in the conflict between Christian (and Jewish and to a large extent Islamic) morality and the secularist orthodoxy. The issues immediately in play have mainly, though not exclusively, to do with sexuality, the transmitting and taking of human life, and the place of religion and religiously informed moral judgment in public life.

According to the secularist orthodoxy, a child prior to birth—or some other marker event sometime before or soon after birth, such as the emergence of detectable brain–wave function or the acquisition of self–awareness—has no right not to be killed at the direction of its mother, no right, at least, that the law may legitimately recognize and protect. At the other edge of life, orthodox secularists believe that every individual has a right to commit suicide and to be assisted in committing suicide, should that person, for whatever reasons, prefer death to life.

In short, secularism rejects the proposition central to the Judeo–Christian tradition of thought about issues of life and death: that human life is intrinsically, and not merely instrumentally, good and therefore morally inviolable. It rejects traditional morality's condemnation of abortion, suicide, infanticide of so–called defective children, and certain other life–taking acts.

The secularist orthodoxy also rejects the Judeo–Christian understanding of marriage as a bodily, emotional, and spiritual union of one man and one woman, ordered to the generating, nurturing, and educating of children, marked by exclusivity and permanence, and consummated and actualized by acts that are reproductive in type, even if not, in every case, in fact. Marriage, for secularists, is a legal convention whose goal is to support a merely emotional union—which may or may not, depending upon the subjective preferences of the partners, be marked by commitments of exclusivity and permanence, which may or may not be open to children depending on whether partners want children, and in which sexual acts of any type mutually agreeable to the partners are perfectly acceptable.

As any type of mutually agreeable consensual sexual act is considered as good as any other, secularist orthodoxy rejects the idea, common not only to Judaism and Christianity but to the world's other great cultures and religious traditions, that marriage is an inherently heterosexual institution. According to secularist orthodoxy, same–sex "marriages" are no less truly marriages than those between partners of opposite sexes who happen to be infertile.

And orthodox secularism, consistent with its view of what marriage is, declines to view marriage as the principle of rectitude in sexual conduct. So orthodox secularists reject as utterly benighted the notion that sex outside of marriage is morally wrong. For them, what distinguishes morally good from bad sex is not whether it is marital, but, rather, whether it is consensual. The consent of the parties involved (or, as in the case of adultery, other parties with a legitimate interest) is the touchstone of sexual morality. So long as there is no coercion or deception involved, orthodox secularism proposes no ground of moral principle for rejecting premarital sex, promiscuity, "open" marriage, etc.

It is not that all secularists believe that sexual passions should be completely unrestrained; it is rather that they conceive constraints on sexual activity other than the principle of consent as merely prudential in nature rather than moral. For example, secularists may counsel against promiscuity, but will do so not on the moral ground that it damages the integrity of people who engage in it, but rather on the prudential ground that it courts disease, unwanted pregnancy, and general unhappiness—which of course it does. To the extent, however, that "safe–sex" techniques can reduce the risk of these and other bad consequences of promiscuity, orthodox secularism proposes no ground for avoiding it.

On the question of the place of religion and religiously informed moral judgment in public life, orthodox secularism stands for the strict and absolute separation of not only church and state, but also faith and public life: no prayer, not even an opportunity for

silent prayer, in public schools; no aid to parochial schools; no displays of religious symbols in the public square; no legislation based on the religiously informed moral convictions of legislators or voters.

Here secularism goes far beyond the views shared by most Americans: namely, that everyone should enjoy the right to be free from coercion in matters of religious belief, expression, and worship; that people should not suffer discrimination or disabilities under civil law based on their religious beliefs and affiliations; and that government should be evenhanded in its treatment of religious groups. Secularism aims to privatize religion altogether, to render religiously informed moral judgment irrelevant to public affairs and public life, and to establish itself, secularist ideology, as the nation's public philosophy.

Orthodox secularism promotes the myth that there is only one basis for disbelieving its tenets: namely, the claim that God has revealed propositions contrary to these tenets. Most orthodox secularists would have us believe that their positions are fully and decisively vindicated by reason and therefore can be judged to have been displaced only on the basis of irrational or, at least, nonrational faith.{1} They assert that they have the reasonable position; any claims to the contrary must be based on unreasoned faith. Secularists are in favor of a "religious freedom" that allows everyone to believe as he wishes, but claims based on this "private faith" must not be the grounds of public policy. Policy must be based on what secularists have lately come to call "public reason."

Interestingly, there have been two different lines of response by religious people to this myth promoted by orthodox secularism.

Some concede that religious and even moral judgments depend on faith that cannot be rationally grounded, but they argue that secularism itself is based on a nonrational faith, that secularism must, in the end, also rest on metaphysical and moral claims that cannot be proved. In that way, they suggest, secularism is just like religion, and is not entitled to any special standing that would qualify it as the nation's public philosophy. In fact, its standing would be less than that of the Judeo–Christian tradition, since it is not the tradition upon which the country was founded. On this account, secularism itself is a sectarian doctrine and, as such, is incapable of fulfilling its own demands of being accessible to "public reason."

A second response by people of faith to the myth promoted by orthodox secularism is to affirm the demand for public reasons for public policies and offer to do battle with secularism on the field of rational debate. Those who take this view tend to agree that secularism is itself a sectarian doctrine, but they claim that religious faith, and especially religiously informed moral judgment, can be based upon and defended by appeal to publicly accessible reasons. Indeed, they argue that sound religious faith and moral theology will be informed, in part, by insight into the authentic and fully public reasons provided by principles of natural law and natural justice.

These principles are available for rational affirmation by people of good will and sound judgment, even apart from their revelation by God in the Scriptures and in the life, death,

and resurrection of Christ. Based on this view, it is possible for Christians to join forces with believing Jews, Muslims, and people from other religious traditions who share a commitment to the sanctity of human life and to other moral principles.

These two distinct lines of response to orthodox secularism are not entirely incompatible. They agree that secularism itself is a sectarian doctrine with its own metaphysical and moral presuppositions and foundations, with its own myths, and, one might even argue, its own rituals. It is a pseudo–religion. Christians can also agree that orthodox secularism is caught in a dilemma. By defining "public reason" stringently enough to exclude appeals to natural law principles, secularism will make it impossible for its own proponents to meet its demand for public reasons. If, on the other hand, it loosens the definition of public reasons sufficiently to pass its own test, it will not be able to rule out principles of natural law, natural rights, or natural justice, as in: "We hold these truths to be self–evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, and that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"—appeals to "the laws of nature and nature's God."

Both religious responses I have outlined deny that reason vindicates secularist morality. The first, however, denies that reason can identify moral truths, content with the claim that secularism is no more rational than, say, Christian belief. The second, by contrast, accepts the proposition that reason can and should be used to identify moral truths, including truths of political morality, but claims that Judeo–Christian morality is rationally superior to the morality of orthodox secularism. As already noted, this is my own position.

Let's take the central issues of life and death. If we lay aside all the rhetorical grandstanding and obviously fallacious arguments, questions of abortion, infanticide, suicide, and euthanasia turn on the question of whether bodily life is intrinsically good, as Judaism and Christianity teach, or merely instrumentally good, as orthodox secularists believe.

If the former, then even the life of an early embryo or a severely retarded child or a comatose person has value and dignity. Their value and dignity are not to be judged by what they can do, how they feel, how they make us feel, or what we judge their "quality" of life to be. Their value and dignity transcend the instrumental purposes to which their lives can be put. They enjoy a moral inviolability that will be respected and protected in any fully just regime of law.

If bodily life is, as orthodox secularists believe, merely a means to other ends and not an end in itself, then a person who no longer gets what he wants out of life may legitimately make a final exit by suicide. If he is unable to commit suicide under his own power, he is entitled to assistance. If he is not lucid enough to make the decision for himself, then judgment must be substituted for him by the family or by a court to make the "right to die" effectively available to him.

Secularists would have us believe that, apart from revelation, we have no reason to affirm the intrinsic goodness and moral inviolability of human life. That simply isn't true. In fact, the secularist proposition that bodily life is merely instrumentally good entails a metaphysical dualism of the person and the body that is rationally untenable.

Implicit in the view that human life is merely instrumentally and not intrinsically valuable is a particular understanding of the human person as an essentially non–bodily being who inhabits a nonpersonal body. According to this understanding—which contrasts with the Judeo–Christian view of the human person as a dynamic unity of body, mind, and spirit—the "person" is the conscious and desiring "self" as distinct from the body which may exist (as in the case of pre– and post–conscious human beings) as a merely "biological," and, thus, sub–personal, reality.{2} But the dualistic view of the human person makes nonsense of the experience all of us have in our activities of being dynamically unified actors—of being, that is, embodied persons and not persons who merely "inhabit" our bodies and direct them as extrinsic instruments under our control, like automobiles. We don't sit in the physical body and direct it as an instrument, the way we sit in a car and make it go left or right.

This experience of unity of body, mind, and spirit is itself no mere illusion. Philosophical arguments have undermined any theory that purports to demonstrate that the human being is, in fact, two distinct realities, namely, a "person" and a (sub–personal) body. Any such theory will, unavoidably, contradict its own starting point, since reflection necessarily begins from one's own conscious awareness of oneself as a unitary actor. So the defender of dualism, in the end, will never be able to identify the "I" who undertakes the project of reflection. He will simply be unable to settle whether the "I" is the conscious and desiring aspect of the "self," or the "mere living body." If he seeks to identify the "I" with the former, then he separates himself inexplicably from the living human organism that is recognized by others (and, indeed, by himself) as the reality whose behavior (thinking, questioning, asserting, etc.) constitutes the philosophical enterprise in question. And if, instead, he identifies the "I" with that "mere living body," then he leaves no role for the conscious and desiring aspect of the "self" which, on the dualistic account, is truly the "person." As a recent treatment of the subject sums up the matter: "Person" (as understood in dualistic theories) and "mere living body" are "constructs neither of which refers to the unified self who had set out to explain his or her own reality; both of them purport to refer to realities other than that unified self but somehow, inexplicably, related to it." In short, "person/body dualisms" purport to be theories of something, but cannot, in the end, identify something of which to be the theory.

From these arguments one rationally concludes that the body, far from being a nonpersonal and indeed sub–personal instrument at the direction and disposal of the conscious and desiring "self," is irreducibly part of the personal reality of the human being. It is properly understood, therefore, as fully sharing in the dignity—the intrinsic worth—of the person and deserving the respect due to persons precisely as such.

A comatose human being is a comatose person. The early embryo is a human being and, precisely as such, a person—the same person who will be an infant, a toddler, an

adolescent, an adult. The genetically complete, distinct, dynamically unified, self–integrating human organism that we currently identify as, say, the sixtythree–year–old Father Richard John Neuhaus is the same organism, the same human being—the same person—who was once a twenty–eight–year–old civil rights and anti–war activist, a precocious sixteen–year–old high school student, a mischievous adolescent, a toddler, an infant, a fetus, an embryo. Although he has grown and changed in many ways, no change of nature (or "substance") occurred as he matured—with his completeness, distinctness, unity, and identity fully intact—from the embryonic through the fetal, infant, child, and adolescent stages of his development, and finally into adulthood. He was a human being—a whole, living member of the species Homo sapiens—from the start. He did not become a human being sometime after he came to be; nor will he cease being a human being prior to his ceasing to be (i.e., his dying). In view of these facts, it is evident that the central ground of the secularist defense of abortion, infanticide, suicide, and euthanasia is decisively undercut. And it is undercut, not by appeal to revelation, as important as revealed truth is to the life of faith, but by engagement directly with the best arguments that secularists make on the very plane in which they make them.

Much the same is true in the area of sexual morality. Secularists would have us believe that marriage is a social and legal convention that in a variety of possible ways serves a purely emotional bond between two persons. (And if it is a purely emotional bond, some ask, why only two?) They believe that, apart from revealed religious doctrine (which other people may, in the exercise of their religious freedom, happen not to share), no one has reasons for believing marriage to be anything more. Again, this is untrue.

Marriage is a basic human good. By that I mean it is an intrinsic good that provides noninstrumental reasons for choice and action, reasons which are knowable and understandable even apart from divine revelation. Rational reflection on marriage as it is participated in by men and women makes it clear: since men and women are essentially embodied (and not simply inhabitors of a suit of flesh), the biological union of spouses in reproductive–type acts consummates and actualizes their marriage, making the spouses truly, and not merely metaphorically, "two in one flesh." The sexual union of spouses—far from being something extrinsic to marriage or merely instrumental to procreation, pleasure, the expression of tender feelings, or anything else—is an essential aspect of marriage as an intrinsic human good. Marital acts are the biological matrix of the multi–level (bodily, emotional, dispositional, spiritual) sharing of life and commitment that marriage is.

But, one might ask, is a true bodily or "biological" union of persons possible? Indeed it is. Consider that for most human functions or activities, say, digestion or locomotion, the organism performing the function or act is the individual human being. In respect of the act of reproduction, however, things are different. Reproduction is a single act or function, yet it is performed by a male and female as a mated pair. For purposes of reproduction, the male and female partners become a single organism, they form a single reproductive principle. This organic unity is achieved precisely in the reproductive behavior characteristic of the species—even in cases (such as those of infertile couples) in which the nonbehavioral conditions of reproduction do not obtain.

Properly understood in light of a non–dualistic account of the human person, the goodness of marriage and marital intercourse simply cannot be reduced to the status of a mere means to pleasure, feelings of closeness, or any other extrinsic goal. Indeed, it cannot legitimately be treated (as some Christians have, admittedly, sought to treat it) as a mere means to procreation, though children are among the central purposes of marriage and help to specify its meaning as a moral reality even for married couples who cannot have children.

So marital acts realize the unity of marriage, which includes the coming to be of children. In consensual nonmarital sex acts, then, people damage this unity, the integrity of the marriage, inasmuch as the body is part of the personal reality of the human being and no mere sub–personal instrument to be used and disposed of to satisfy the subjective wants of the conscious and desiring part of the "self."

The psychosomatic integrity of the person is another of the basic or intrinsic goods of the human person. This integrity is disrupted in any sexual act that lacks the common good of marriage as its central specifying point. Where sex is sought purely for pleasure, or as a means of inducing feelings of emotional closeness, or for some other extrinsic end, the body is treated as a sub–personal, purely instrumental, reality. This existential separation of the body and the conscious and desiring part of the self serves literally to dis–integrate the person. It takes the person apart, disrupting the good of acting as the dynamically unified being one truly is.

Did our Christian forebears invent this idea of integrity? Did they dream up the notion that sexual immorality damages integrity by dis–integrating the person? No. Christianity has had, to be sure, a very important role in promoting and enhancing our understanding of sexual morality. But in the dialogues of Plato and the teachings of Aristotle, in the writings of Plutarch and the great Roman stoic Musonius Rufus, and, of course, in Jewish tradition, one can find the core of this central, important teaching about the way sex is so central to integrity, and therefore so central not only to us as individuals but to us as a community. Disintegrated, individual human beings cannot form an integrated community.

Secularist orthodoxy—unlike not only Christianity and Judaism but also the classical philosophical tradition—both misidentifies the good to be realized in marriage (imagining that the value of marriage and marital sexual intercourse is purely instrumental to other goods, rather than something good in itself) and overlooks the harm—the dis–integration of persons and the communities they form—which grounds the Christian, Jewish, and classical condemnations of nonmarital sex.

Of course, there are various possible objections to the arguments I have been advancing. Secularists cannot honestly say, however, that these arguments appeal to religious dogmas or fail to state public reasons for, say, forbidding abortion and euthanasia, or preserving the institution of marriage as traditionally understood. The reasons I have identified are central among the reasons why the Christian tradition has rejected abortion and euthanasia and supported the institution of marriage. This is not to deny that

Christians, like our Jewish "elder brothers" in faith, seek the illumination and full understanding of moral principles in the light of Scripture and sacred tradition. But Christians and other believers need not—and typically do not—suggest that abortion, for example, is wrong (or that we know it to be wrong) because God whispered it into our ear, or the ear of a pope or another religious leader, or even into the ear of a sacred writer.

The wrongness of abortion follows from the truth—fully accessible even to unaided reason—that the life of a human being is intrinsically, and not merely instrumentally, good. As a Christian, I believe that each human life is a precious gift from God. But even if one doesn't share that belief, reason nevertheless grasps the truth that human life is intrinsically, and not merely instrumentally, valuable. Reason detects the falsity of the dualistic presuppositions of secularism's belief that human life is merely instrumentally valuable. It identifies the unreasonableness of denying that every innocent human being—irrespective of age, size, stage of development, or condition of dependency—has an inviolable moral right to life.

Reason affirms that if any of us have a right to life, then all of us have it; if we have it at one stage of life, we have it at every stage of life; if we have it in the middle of life, we have it at both edges. There is no rational argument that anybody has been able to come up with—and the best and the brightest in the academy have struggled for more than twenty–five years to do so—that shows that a healthy thirteen–year–old or forty–two–year–old has a right to life, but a comatose eighty–year–old or an unborn child has no right to life. There is no rational basis for distinguishing a class of human beings who have a right to life (and other fundamental human rights) and a class of human beings who do not. This is the moral core of the great "self–evident truth" upon which our nation was founded: the proposition that all of us are "created equal."

Knowledge of this truth does not presuppose Christian faith, although biblical revelation profoundly enriches our understanding of it, and often enough leads to religious conversion. There are many examples of this. A notable recent case is that of Bernard Nathanson, a founder of the organization now known as the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League. He was an atheist and a practicing abortionist who had taken the lives of many unborn children, including one of his own. But he gradually came to see that the deliberate killing of unborn human beings is a violation of the most basic principle of morality and natural justice. So he abandoned the practice of abortion and relinquished his important role in the advocacy of abortion as a political matter. Soon, he joined the prolife movement and began working to roll back the abortion license. A few years later, he abandoned atheism and entered into Christian faith—which to him made sense of, grounded, and profoundly enriched the basic moral understanding that he had initially achieved by way of rational, self–critical reflection.

Orthodox secularist moral belief portrays personal morality as being essentially concerned with extrinsic constraints upon appetite or passion. It presupposes that the ultimate motives for whatever we do are grounded in our desires; reason's role is purely instrumental. The eighteenth–century philosopher David Hume, a founding father of modern secularism, summed up the position: "Reason is and

ought only to be the slave of the passions, and may never pretend to any office other than to serve and obey them." Reason's role, in other words, is not to identify what is rational, what people should want, but merely to devise means of obtaining goals that people happen to want.

Ultimately, this view of reason makes it impossible to vindicate any fundamental moral principles, including any fundamental human rights. If reason is purely instrumental and can't tell us what to want but only how to get to what we want, how can we say that people have a fundamental right to freedom of speech? Freedom of the press? Freedom of religion? Privacy? Where do those fundamental rights come from? What is their basis? Why respect someone else's rights?

By contrast, the Christian understanding of morality starts from an appreciation of the basic human goods that provide more than merely instrumental reasons for action. In right moral actions people choose for the sake of these goods in ways that are compatible with the fulfillment and well–being of individuals and communities. Morality's understanding of human flourishing provides more–than–merely–instrumental reasons for action. Emotion or passion, when rightly ordered, supports what reason commends and helps us to accomplish the morally good ends that we have basic reasons to pursue.

Here again the Christian view lines up in important ways with that of the pre–Christian Greek philosophers—Plato and Aristotle, in particular—in understanding reason to be the master of passion in what the ancient thinkers unhesitatingly referred to as the "rightly ordered soul."

Of course, Christianity, like classical philosophy, understands perfectly well that the soul can be wrongly ordered, that emotion or passion can overcome reason and reduce it to the status of a slave that produces rationalizations for morally wrongful behavior. That is what Christians call sin. Yes it happens, but our goal should be to order our souls rightly so that reason controls passion, and not the other way around. When passion is in control, reason is reduced to a mere instrument, becoming its own worst enemy as it cooks up rationalizations for actions that we know to be morally wrong.

Christians can and should challenge at the most fundamental level secularism's instrumentalist view of reason and morality. Secularism's account of the relationship between reason and desire, far from being brutally rigorous in eschewing unprovable metaphysical hypotheses, rests upon and entails metaphysical propositions that not only are controversial, but in the end (say, in the case of person/ body dualism) are demonstrably false.

Chief among secularism's philosophical vulnerabilities is its implicit denial of free choice or free will. People can make free choices just to the extent that they are capable of understanding and acting upon reasons that are not reducible to desire or emotion. In denying the possibility of rationally motivated action, secularism denies the possibility of free choice since it claims that we don't, in any fundamental sense, cause our own actions. What are they caused by? Either by the force of external pressures (whether one

knows it or not), or by internal factors (such as desires). In the secularist worldview, "hard" and "soft" forms of determinism constitute the universe of possible accounts of all human behavior. Free choice is written off as an illusion.

Christian philosophers such as Germain Grisez, Joseph M. Boyle, Jr., and Olaf Tollefsen have rigorously shown, however, that the denial of free choice is rationally untenable, because it is a self–referentially contradictory claim, a self–defeating proposition. No one can rationally deny free choice, or claim as illusory our ordinary experience of freely choosing, without presupposing the possibility of free choice. To deny free choice is to claim that it is more rational to believe that there is no free choice than to believe that there is. But this, in turn, presupposes that one can identify norms of rationality and freely choose to conform one's beliefs to those norms. It presupposes that we are free to affirm the truth or falsity of a proposition, our desires or emotions or preferences to the contrary notwithstanding. Otherwise, the assertion of no free choice is pointless. The person who says people can't freely choose presupposes that there are reasons for accepting his claim, otherwise his act of asserting it would be pointless. But our ability to understand and act upon such reasons is incompatible with the idea that one is caused by his desires or by outside forces to accept or not accept such claims. So someone who denies free choice implicitly contradicts his own claim.

Here again, orthodox secularists are stuck, not because they have been beaten over the head with the Bible, but on the plane where they have made the argument—the plane of rationality. No position can be reasonable if it is self–referentially inconsistent, if it presupposes the opposite of the very claim it asserts. But if the "no free choice" claim is self–defeating, then we have an additional reason for affirming the existence of basic, intelligible, understandable reasons for action—reasons that are not reducible to desires or emotions or merely instrumental to the satisfaction of desires. And we have an additional reason for rejecting secularism's conception of morality as basically concerned with extrinsic restraints on appetite, rather than the integral directiveness of the basic human goods that provide such reasons for action.

Orthodox secularists typically say that we should respect the rights of others, even as we go about the business of satisfying our own desires. Ultimately, however, secularism cannot provide any plausible account of where rights come from or why we should respect others' rights. Of course, most secularists emphatically believe that people have rights. Indeed, they frequently accuse Christians and other religious believers of supporting policies that violate people's rights. We are all familiar with the rhetoric: You religious people shouldn't be imposing your values on other people. You are violating their rights! If it is between consenting adults, stay out of it! Any two (or more?) people have the right to define "marriage" for themselves. Women have a right to abortion. People have a right to take their own lives. Who are you to say otherwise?

But on the presuppositions of the secularist view, why should anybody respect anybody else's rights? What is the reason for respecting rights? Any answer must state a moral proposition, but what, on orthodox secularist premises, could provide the ground of its moral truth?

You may ask, Why doesn't the secularist cheerfully affirm moral subjectivism or moral relativism? Indeed, isn't some sort of moral relativism at the heart of secularism?

While one still hears subjectivism or relativism invoked at cocktail parties and in undergraduate classrooms—and even occasionally in faculty lounges—it seems that the heyday of moral relativism is over, even among doctrinaire secularists. Most sophisticated secularists have concluded that relativism is ultimately inconsistent with many of their own cherished moral claims, particularly those having to do with claims about rights—the right to abortion, the right to sexual freedom, the right to die. As the distinguished liberal political philosopher Joel Feinberg has warned: "Liberals must beware of relativism—or, at least, of a sweeping relativism—lest they be hoist on their own petard."

If relativism is true, then it is not wrong in principle to have an abortion, but neither is it wrong for people who happen to abhor abortion to attempt to legislate against it or to interfere with someone else's having an abortion by, say, blockading clinics or even shooting abortionists. Claims of a right to abortion are manifestly moral claims. Claims that it is wrong to shoot abortionists are moral claims. They could possibly be true only if moral relativism and subjectivism are false. So the mainstream of orthodox secularism at the end of the twentieth century has become self–consciously moralistic and nonrelativistic.

This is not to say that secularism is no longer, in significant respects, a relativist doctrine. It is merely to say that secularism is no longer a thoroughgoing and self–consciously relativist doctrine. Insofar as it remains relativistic, it has a massive philosophical problem. Secularism, at least in its liberal manifestations, makes the rights of others the principle of moral constraints upon action, relativizing allegedly self–regarding actions. But it generates a critical question it has no way of answering: Why should anyone respect the rights of others? Merely prudential answers—such as, people should respect the rights of others so that others will respect their rights, or people should respect the rights of others to avoid being punished—simply won't do. The fact is that people can often get away with violating others' rights. And they know it. And many do it.

If people shouldn't violate the rights of others, it must be because doing so is morally wrong, but on the secularist account why is it morally wrong? What is the source of its moral wrongness? The eminent philosopher and Christian convert Alasdair MacIntyre observes that traditions of thought about morality go into crisis when they generate questions they lack the resources to answer. By this standard, orthodox secularism is a tradition in crisis. It generates the question, Why should I respect the rights of others? Yet it possesses no resources for answering it.

By contrast, Christian thought understands that human rights are rooted in intelligible and basic human goods. It, therefore, has no logical difficulty explaining why each of us has an obligation to respect the rights of others, as well as to act in conformity with other moral principles. And recent Christian teaching, including the teaching of popes and Protestant bodies, speaks unhesitatingly of universal human rights, without fear of

collapsing into relativism or individualism of the sort that is characteristic of orthodox secularism.

It is true that church teaching about human rights often overlaps with liberal secularist ideology. For example, Christian conservatives and liberal secularists agree on certain questions pertaining to religious freedom and have sometimes—as in the case of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act—joined together in political coalitions.

When church teaching and secularist ideology overlap, particularly on the question of rights, Christian thought has proved itself capable of giving a far superior account of these rights and why each of us has an obligation to respect the rights of others. From this I conclude that Christian teaching is rationally superior to secularism, not only when these worldviews disagree, as over abortion, euthanasia, marriage, and family, but even when they agree.

At the end of the day, whatever is to be said for and against secularism, there can be no legitimate claim for secularism to be a "neutral" doctrine that deserves privileged status as the national public philosophy. As MacIntyre has argued, secularism (which he calls liberalism) is far from being a "tradition–independent" view that merely represents a neutral playing field on which Judaism, Christianity, Marxism, and other traditions can wage a fair fight for the allegiance of the people. Instead, it is itself a tradition of thought about personal and political morality that competes with others.

Secularism rests upon and represents a distinct and controversial set of metaphysical and moral propositions having to do with the relationship of consciousness to bodiliness and of reason to desire, the possibility of free choice, and the source and nature of human dignity and human rights. Secularist doctrine contains very controversial views about what constitutes a person—views every bit as controversial as the Jewish and Christian views. Secularism is a philosophical doctrine that stands or falls depending on whether its propositions can withstand arguments advanced against them by representatives of other traditions. I have tried to show that secularist orthodoxy cannot withstand the critique to be advanced against it by the tradition of Christian philosophy.

Notes

A minority party within the secularist camp defends secularist ideology not on the ground that its tenets are true or vindicated by reason—secularists of this stripe deny the possibility of moral truth or the power of reason to make sound moral judgments of any type—but on the purely prudential ground that the official commitment of public institutions to secularism is the only way of preserving social peace. Ultimately, this is a hopeless strategy for defending secularism. It must implicitly appeal to the idea of moral truth and invoke the authority of reason (if, for no other purpose, than to establish the value of social peace) even as it officially denies that moral truth is possible and that reason has any real authority.

Moreover, there is simply no warrant for believing that social peace is likely, or more likely, to be preserved by committing our public institutions to secularist ideology. Partisans of worldviews that compete with secularism are, to say the least, unlikely to surrender these institutions to the forces of secularism without a fight; nor is there any reason for them to do so. Consider the issue of abortion: Christians, observant Jews, and others who oppose the taking of unborn human life do not consider a circumstance in which more than a million elective abortions are performed each year to be a situation of "social peace." They quite reasonably reject secularism's claim to constitute nothing more than a neutral playing field on which other worldviews may fairly and civilly compete for the allegiance of the people. As the example of abortion makes clear, secularism is itself one of the competing worldviews. We should credit its claims to neutrality no more than we would accept the claims of a baseball pitcher who in the course of a game declares himself to be umpire and begins calling his own balls and strikes.

It is true that some Christians embrace a certain form of person/body dualism, believing it necessary to identify the human person with the soul as distinct from the body in order to avoid materialism and/or affirm the existence of the immaterial human soul or its immortality. According to this form of dualism, the body, though not an intrinsic part of the person, may nevertheless enjoy a certain dignity by virtue of its association with the soul so that the deliberate destruction of the body, as in suicide, euthanasia, and abortion, may therefore be morally wrongful. Still, the body remains an essentially subpersonal reality and does not in itself participate in the dignity of the person. A homicidal act does not actually destroy a person, though it may nevertheless constitute the wrongful destruction of a person's body. This view, whose proponents can claim the patronage of Plato and Descartes, was rejected by Aquinas and other great Christian thinkers for what I believe to be excellent reasons. They saw that it is by no means logically (or, for that matter, theologically) necessary to identify the human person with the soul as distinct from the body, and thus to deny that bodily life is intrinsic to the human person, in order to avoid materialism or to affirm the soul's existence and immortality. One needn't deny the soul's existence or immortality in order to affirm that the human person is a unity of body and soul—both being intrinsic parts of the person. As the doctrine of the resurrection of the body makes clear, human beings are saved and exist in eternity as bodily persons, not as disembodied souls.

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