Religion is selfish, blinkered and immoral

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‘Religious fanatics murder, bomb and terrorise in the name of their faith’

When politicians consult priests on moral matters, it is time to start worrying. Does it imply bankruptcy of policy, and a scrabbling for ideas? Does it suggest that a mask of sanctimony is being sought to cover policies that need disguise? Or—worse—do the politicians really believe what priests say?

Both of Britain’s main political leaders have turned to religious figures lately, Tony Blair to the maverick Catholic theologian Hans Küng, William Hague to a vocal figure of America’s “Religious Right” who believes that public welfare provision should be replaced by private charity. Hague’s aim is simply to find new packaging for old right-wing policies. Blair’s case is more troubling. He has genuine religious convictions, which prompted him to say at Küng’s Tübingen conference yesterday: “A society where there is religious faith will always, in my view, be inherently more likely to pursue the good of mankind.” His view is troubling because it is false: religion is precisely the wrong resource for thinking about moral issues, and indeed subverts moral debate.

It does so because it is irrelevant to the practical questions of an ethical life. Modern societies value personal autonomy, achievement in earning a living, providing for a family, saving against a rainy day, and being rewarded for success. Christian morality values the opposite. It tells people to consider the lilies which take no thought for the morrow. It tells believers to give their possessions to the poor, warns that a well-off person will find heaven unwelcoming, and preaches subjection to a deity. Such a morality contradicts the fundamental norms of contemporary society.

It is also irrelevant to modern sexual attitudes. Almost all religions confine sex to marriage, and their more orthodox members oppose homosexuality, contraception and abortion, and restrict women to the domestic sphere. Most people ignore the contrast between such views and today’s ethos, and the churches accordingly either temporise or contradict their own earlier teachings.

But religious morality is not merely irrelevant, it is anti-moral. The great moral questions of today concern human rights, war, poverty, and the vast disparities between rich and poor. In the Third World a child dies every two-and-a-half seconds because of starvation or curable disease, while in the first world churchgoers decry pre-marital sex and debate whether divorced couples can remarry in church. By focusing attention on trivia, gross harm is done to the cause of good in the world.

But religion is not only anti-moral, it is often immoral. Elsewhere in the world, religious fundamentalists and fanatics incarcerate women, mutilate genitals, amputate hands, murder, bomb and terrorise in the name of their faith. It is a mistake to think that our own milksop clerics would never behave likewise, for it is not so long in historical terms since Christian priests were burning heretics at the stake or mounting crusades against them, whipping people or slitting their noses and ears for having extra-marital sex, or preaching that masturbation is worse than rape because at least the latter can result in pregnancy. To this day adulterers are stoned to death in certain Muslim countries; if the priests were still on top in the once-Christian world, who can say it would be different? If one looked to religions to provide historical examples of the moral life in practice, one would have to forget a great deal of immorality.
Dispassionately considered, no system of religious ethics adds up to much. Christianity is jejune in its principles. Nietzsche pointed out that the Beatitudes, which state that the poor, the meek and the downtrodden are blessed and will be rewarded in an afterlife, bespeak the psychology of an enslaved people—he meant the Jewish experience of exile in Egypt before Moses. He might have added that they have served the purposes of the comfortably placed throughout history, reconciling the poor and humble to their lot and helping to prevent uprisings.

What little Christianity offers in positive moral injunctions is indistinguishable from the Judaism that preceded it, or from Mohism in ancient China with its ethic of brotherly love and its concern for widows, orphans and social justice.

But neither the Judaeo-Christian nor the Mohist ethics compares to the richness or insight of “pagan” Greek ethics, or to present-day concerns about human rights and animal rights, which are much broader, more inclusive, and more sensitive than anything envisaged in religious morality.

Moreover, concern for the welfare and rights of people, animals and the environment motivated by a sense of the intrinsic worth of these things, and not by divine threats and promises, is the only true source of morality.

This last point is a clincher. Religious ethics is based on a sanction of posthumous rewards and punishments. It makes goodness the diktat of a supernatural being. You do good, by the lights of your religion, in order to achieve eternal bliss. If there are indeed supernatural powers in the universe, it might be prudent to do what they require in the interests of saving your neck; but the motivation is not a moral but a self-regarding and self-interested one. If I see two men do good, one because he wishes to escape punishment by a supposed supernatural agency and the other because he respects his fellow man, I honour the latter infinitely more.

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