

Religion, Society and Secular Values

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Abstract

Our paradigm for religion is Christianity, which appeared as a sub-society, the culture of which differed both from Jewish culture and from that of the Greeks and Romans. Human beings are essentially social, depending upon society for all rational thought and activity. As social beings we live with regard to customs we think good on the whole. Customs are rationalised by theoretical and moral beliefs. They contrast with nature and also with convention and habit. Religions, like families, are societies intermediate between individuals and states. So-called secular values concern the same things as religious and have comparable practical consequences.

In the past popular writers sometimes used to contrast religion with science; recently they have been pitting ‘religious’ people against ‘non-religious’ and religious against secular values. The utility of these contrasts is weakened by a lack of clarity about some or all the terms. What are values? What is religion? What is secularity? There is a risk that these words become labels for what a writer likes or dislikes, rather as the words ‘right’ and ‘left’ have in political discussions.

The noun ‘value’ is here used, not as it is by people who value houses, land or works of art, but for views about what is good or bad, right or wrong. David Cameron, the British Prime Minister, writing in *The Mail on Sunday* on 15 June 2014, gave as British values freedom, tolerance, accepting personal and social responsibility and respecting and upholding the rule of law. He meant, no doubt, that these are things the British ought to value, rather than things they always have. John Stuart Mill, at least, remarks on ‘the strong permanent leaven of intolerance ... which at all times abides in the middle class of this country’.¹

It is less easy to say what today we mean by ‘religion’. A recent commission on ‘Religion and Belief in Public Life’,² though it began with an undertaking to do this, never actually did it. Religion is not what was meant by *religio* in classical antiquity or the Middle Ages. To the ancient Romans *religio* meant fear of the preternatural; in the Middle Ages it meant the consecrated life of nuns,

¹ *On Liberty, Representative Government, The Subjection of Women* (London: Oxford University Press 1960), 40.

² *Living with Difference* (Cambridge: The Woolf Institute, 2015).

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monks and friars. Only after the Reformation, when wars broke out between Catholics and Protestants and a word was needed to say what they were fighting about, did it come to mean what 'religion' means today.

And what, precisely, is that? William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) defined it as 'the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude'.³ In 1927 Julian Huxley wrote a book entitled *Religion without Revelation* and defined religion as 'the reaction of the personality as a whole to its experience of the Universe as a whole',⁴ and Stephen Clark has recently argued that atheistic humanism with its commitment to truth, reason and human perfectibility is so much the product of European Christian culture that it is not just a religion but a Christian sect.⁵ Russell, however, was right to call God and immortality 'the central doctrines of the Christian religion', and continued:

It cannot be said that either doctrine is essential to religion ... But we in the West have come to think of them as the irreducible minimum of theology.⁶

By 'religion' 'we in the West' actually mean Christianity, and anything that sufficiently resembles it for us to slap the same label onto it.⁷ Christianity is our paradigm for a religion. It has a number of salient features. It is a social affair; Christians belong to churches, denominations, parishes, congregations, and these associations have bishops, priests, pastors and similar officers. There are communal prayers, processions and other rites, and special buildings, cathedrals, parish churches, chapels and so forth, where these rites are celebrated. There is a sacred book, the Bible. There are prophets, reformers and other respected introducers of new ideas and practices. There are beliefs concerning God and life after death which provide a rationale for Christian practices. And their beliefs and practices are deeply important to Christians. Most of these features are easily discernible in Jewish life as recorded in the Old Testament,

³ *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Longmans Green, 1928), 31.

⁴ *Religion Without Revelation* (London: Benn, 1927), 135.

⁵ 'Atheism considered as a Christian sect', *Philosophy* 90 (2015): 277–303.

⁶ *What I Believe* (New York: Dutton, 1925), 5.

⁷ So, in effect, William P. Alston (in Paul Edwards, ed., *The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (London and New York, 1967), s. v, 'Religion').

and in classical Greek and Rome. So we say that the ancient Jews, Greeks and Romans all had religions.

We Westerners think beliefs an important part of religion. We show that by sometimes using the word 'faith' instead of 'religion': we talk of 'faith schools' or call Hinduism a 'faith'. The word 'faith' suggests a belief which is held tenaciously without rational justification. A rational justification would be a proof, either by deductive logic or by empirical observation, that the belief is true or at least useful, where utility is limited to conduciveness to some quantifiable economic or biological advantage. Some writers suggest that religious beliefs were useful biologically in the past: they helped believers to pass on their genes. The past believers, however, never justified them in this way, and the modern writers who make this suggestion do not allow that this justification is still valid.

Beliefs are indeed important to Christians, who formulate them in creeds, but creeds do not exist outside Christianity, and what we call 'beliefs' play little part in the conscious thinking of non-European civilisations. The concept of a belief is a legacy from the philosophers of ancient Greece.⁸ Western anthropologists have inherited a concept of rationality according to which it requires having reasons for your behaviour, and a reason is something that can be formulated in words as a belief. They therefore attribute to sane adults in all societies, especially the most primitive, beliefs that would rationalise the customs they follow. But it is unrealistic to suppose that these are always consciously held. A scholar would be puzzled to say what religious beliefs were generally held by the classical Greeks or Romans, and spokesmen for what we count as non-Christian religions often deny that what we call 'beliefs' play an important role in them. In general the beliefs that rationalise their behaviour are held by people not as solitary individuals but as social beings, and whether these beliefs are held consciously is largely a matter of the customs of their society. What I mean by 'holding a belief as a social being' I hope to explain shortly.

Christian beliefs divide into two varieties. There are doctrinal or dogmatic beliefs like the belief that the universe depends on the Jewish God, and that Jesus returned to life from death. What makes these beliefs religious is not that they lack justification – many beliefs are unjustified without being religious – nor that they concern non-physical entities: pure mathematics is about

⁸ See William Charlton, 'Is the concept of the mind parochial?' in *Conceptions of Life and the Good Life in Early China and Greco-Roman Antiquity*, ed. Richard King (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 213–26.

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non-physical things, but the belief that every even number above 2 is the sum of two primes is not religious. They are religious because they provide a rationale for social practices about which people care. In themselves, however, they are theoretical and aspire to objective truth. Secondly there are moral beliefs to the effect that some behaviour is right or wrong, good or bad. We call these thoughts 'beliefs' because we formulate them in sentences the surface grammar of which is indicative, sentences like 'Abortion is wrong' and 'Generosity to the poor is good.' It is arguable that the words 'wrong' and 'good' do not signify anything that can be true or false of an action or character-trait, and that the thinking these sentences express, therefore, is rather right or wrong than true or false. However that may be, Christians regard holding beliefs of both kinds, dogmatic and moral, as essential to Christianity. Not necessarily, however, quite the same beliefs. Different Christian denominations have slightly different beliefs. That is why they are sometimes called different 'religions'.

This analysis of our concept of religion does not explain the most important thing about it, which is that it matters to people and is divisive. It matters because (contrary to current orthodoxy) we are by nature social beings. James's definition of religion quoted just now as 'the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude' is wildly misleading and Rousseau's 'religion of man'⁹ is an illusion.

To belong to a society is not just to have one's name inscribed in an official register of members. A list could be made of the left-handed women who were born north of the Arctic Circle, but they would not be a society. Societies have rules and customs, and to belong to a society is to be guided by its rules and customs. Some societies exist for some specific purpose. Business companies and partnerships have an economic purpose. Tennis clubs, yacht clubs and the traditional London clubs have recreational purposes. Members are guided by their rules and customs only when pursuing those purposes. But some societies have no specific purpose; they are simply, it might be said, societies for living. Sovereign states are of this kind; so are certain societies intermediate between individual citizens and states, notably families and religions. Their rules concern birth, death, procreation and education, and thus shape our existence as social beings, but since we are essentially social we may not recognise this or understand how it comes about.

⁹ *The Social Contract* 4. 8.

Hobbes and Locke, never having read Wittgenstein, imagined that language started with a solitary man's introducing signs to record the ideas in his mind.¹⁰ In fact we depend on society not only for speech and the intellectual functions that depend upon it like thinking about the past and the future and understanding natural phenomena and human behaviour, but for all our conscious and rational activities.

The vocabulary of a language, besides words which belong to its grammar like the English 'not', 'if' and 'than', contains words for things that do or might exist. Some of these are words for natural kinds, natural substances like water and gold and natural species like wolves and oak-trees. These have close equivalents in the languages of all societies in which the kinds are found and recognised. Others are words for mental and political phenomena, like the English 'pernickety', 'snobbish', 'smarmy,' 'imaginative', 'sensitive' 'mercy', 'plutocracy', 'elitism'. Political and psychological terms used in one society may have no equivalents in the language of a different society. The Greek words *thumos* and *aidoios* have no English equivalent, though the phenomena for which the Greeks used them exist in England, and our word 'aristocracy' does not mean the same as the Greek *aristokratia*. Words such as these, however, are central to expressing practical judgements and beliefs. We make such judgements and hold such beliefs as members of language-using societies.

Terrestrial life depends on certain physical processes, chiefly the Earth's daily rotation relative to the Sun and its annual revolution round it. These processes affect different latitudes in different ways. Societies in arctic, tropical and temperate zones deal differently with light and dark, make different use of the seasons and have different social practices associated with their progression and with the ripening of fruit and crops. As a result their members have much richer conceptions of the processes themselves than simply as relative movements of two physical bodies. These richer conceptions belong to them as social beings.

The Greeks distinguished between human nature, which is the same everywhere, and customs, which vary from society to society. It is natural to take in nourishment by the mouth to seek an ambient temperature within certain limits – such limits, in fact, as will maintain the temperature of blood in the brain at about 37 degrees.¹¹ Everywhere people do this, but the kinds of food, drink

¹⁰ Hobbes, *Leviathan* 1.4 (the reference to God is probably tongue-in-cheek); Locke, *Essay* 3.1.2.

¹¹ See Colin Strang, 'The Perception of Heat,' *Aristotelian Society* 61 (1961) 239–2.

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and shelter they seek and the ways in which they seek them vary from society to society, and are matters of custom.

Animals are born, breed and die. Without these occurrences there would be no species, and *a fortiori* no societies. No human society ignores them, but how a society deals with them is a matter of custom. Societies transmit their customs in educating the young. These customs are central to their ethical and legal systems.

We experience painful and pleasant bodily sensations as individuals, and we can enjoy doing something or be bored as individuals; moreover individuals in the same society have different tastes. Nevertheless the solitary activities they find pleasant or boring – reading poetry, playing solitaire, surfing, thinking about problems in mathematics – depend on their society. Many of the activities society actually provides, and none of them would be thought of as an end in itself without society.

Besides bodily sensations people experience strong emotions of grief, of resentment and rage, of sexual desire, of rivalry, envy and jealousy. These experiences involve thoughts which contain psychological and political concepts. We are subject to these feelings as members of a society, we cannot deal rationally with them as solitary individuals, and society offers us customary ways of managing them.

Customs are essentially social; in that respect they differ from habits, which we can form as individuals. They also differ from conventions. Conventions like shaking hands when you greet someone, or using the word 'defecate' for a particular bodily process, are also social, but they are recognised to be arbitrary and they can therefore be changed easily. Customs cannot. Though not based directly upon economic or scientific knowledge, they are not arbitrary, nor do they grow up by chance. Customs of different kinds – to do with eating, dress, social interaction, warfare, birth, death and all parts of life – grow up together, interacting and forming a culture; not like pebbles in a pile but like living organisms in a wild area forming an eco-system. They are shaped by the history of the society in which they exist; and they are tested pragmatically over time. In general, therefore, they make economic and biological sense. They may be altered in response to changing circumstances and new knowledge; but a society must already have elaborate customs before the activity of legislation can emerge, and an individual can evaluate a custom only against a background of other customs that unquestioned.

To belong to a society is to live with regard to its customs, and largely in accordance with them. You do this in sharing its distinctive way of thinking about the world and judging what custom prescribes in a given situation to be good or right in that situation – good and

right not because the custom exists and prescribes it but just as a response to that situation.

This point is hard to grasp. People often suppose that we behave as laws prescribe because it is in our interest as individuals to do so; only so can we avoid punishment and enjoy the security and conveniences of civilisation. When I am driving I might slow down at a speed limit sign or refrain from parking in a forbidden space, not because I think I am driving too fast or because the space seems unsuitable, but simply in order to escape a fine. In general, however, we think the customs and laws by which we live good; that is, we think that what they prescribe is, for the most part, right or good in itself, and what they forbid, bad or wrong. And to think this is to be disposed to see situations in a certain way. If it is customary in my society not to read other people's letters, then for me to think this custom good is for me to take the fact that a letter is addressed to someone else as at least a *prima facie* reason for not reading it. If it is the custom to teach girls of five to read, to think this custom good is to be conscious of your daughter's reaching that age as a reason for teaching her or having her taught. In Antigone's society custom prescribed burying dead relations. Antigone did not want to bury Polyneices in order to escape punishment, quite the contrary. She may have wanted to benefit him; but only because the custom of her society was rationalised by the belief that burial is necessary for well-being after death. In a society with a different custom she would not have wanted to benefit him by burying him, perhaps (in a society that discouraged family ties and in which individuals looked only to the state) not have wanted to benefit him at all. As it was, her consciousness of her brother's unburied state took the form of a desire to bury him. In following custom we not aiming at our own good as individuals or at anyone else's. Those are rational aims and we may have them too, but we have a further aim, also rational though perhaps unconscious, the good of our society.

Many people today, political and religious leaders among them, speak of the 'common good', but either they equate this crudely with increase in the gross domestic product, or they conceive it as the greatest happiness of the greatest number of individuals as such. That was Mill's view. Men, says Mill,

in a state of society are still men; their actions and passions are obedient to the laws of individual human nature. Men are not, when brought together, converted into another kind of substance, with different properties: as hydrogen and oxygen are different from water, or as hydrogen, oxygen, carbon and azote are

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different from nerves, muscles and tendons. Human beings in society have no properties but those which are derived from, and may be resolved into, the laws of the nature of individual man. In social phenomena the Composition of Causes is the universal law.¹²

He inferred that the good of a society is an aggregate of the goods attained by its members as individuals:

Each person's happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons.¹³

And happiness consists in things we experience as individuals: 'By "happiness" is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain'.¹⁴

Christian thinkers have a broader conception of happiness, but the Second Vatican Council defined the common good in words that would not displease Mill as:

the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily,

and added:

The social order and its development must constantly yield to the good of the person.¹⁵

Someone might argue: a common good cannot be something good for a society as an entity distinct from its members, because a society is not a living organism, and only living entities can be benefited. But there is something that stands to a society as life stands to an individual, namely the living of its members with regard to its laws and customs. We all aim at this, not because we hope to derive some benefit to ourselves as individuals, but because we are social beings and it is good for us as such to share in social life. Homer says:

Nothing is stronger and better than this,
Than when two people, minds thinking alike,
Hold fast to a home, husband and wife. (Odyssey 6. 182–4)

What Homer calls 'two people, minds thinking alike' [*homophroneonte noëmasin*] we call 'sharing the same values.' The nuclear

¹² *System of Logic* 6. 7. 1

¹³ *Utilitarianism*, Chapter 4.

¹⁴ *Utilitarianism*, Chapter 2. Mill conceived all pleasure, pain and sorrow on the model of bodily sensations.

¹⁵ *Gaudium et Spes*, s. 26

family is a society, though a small one. And a nuclear human family could no more exist on its own than an individual; it presupposes a village, and one not too distant from other villages.

Far from seeing any good in living according to custom, Mill says 'The despotism of custom is everywhere the standing hindrance to human advancement;' for a person 'to conform to custom, merely *as* custom, does not educate or develop in him any of the qualities which are the distinct endowment of a human being.'¹⁶ Mill may have imagined that if the living of members according to custom were identified with the common good societies would never progress; but that does not follow. If living according to custom involves 'minds thinking alike', ceasing to think a custom good will lead to the custom's being changed or dropped. Mill perhaps assumed that following custom must be blind because he himself blindly followed in the tradition of Hobbes and Rousseau. Brought up on Genesis, not Darwin, Enlightenment thinkers imagined societies as arising when individuals with intellectual capacities like ours, but subsisting by solitary hunter-gathering, and breeding by casual encounters, decide to form societies for their individual benefit. Adam and Eve are just like us except that they have no parents and no neighbours.

Besides being naturally social we have disinterested concern for other individuals, whether members of our society or not; it is natural, as Aristotle spells it out, to 'do a service to someone who needs it not in return for anything else nor in order to get anything back for the service, but simply to benefit the person in need.'¹⁷ This too is denied by philosophers who think that physical determinism and evolution by natural selection together entail psychological egoism, and infer that we help others only in order to be helped in return, or to obtain feelings of smugness or to assuage feelings of sympathy that we experience as selfish individuals. Non-philosophers, however, think it natural for us sometimes to make the good of another person or another animal an end in itself. Awareness that something we can do will benefit that person or animal takes the form of wanting to do it; awareness that it will be harmful takes the form of unwillingness to do it. We are altruists as well as social beings, or rather human behaviour is a synthesis of egoist, social and disinterested aims.

In general we act to benefit ourselves and others in accordance with the customs of our society, but inevitably on occasion our interests as individuals conflict with those of our friends, and pursuing either can

¹⁶ *On Liberty*, 87, 72.

¹⁷ *Rhetoric* 2 1385a17–19

bring us up against the customs of our society. Such conflicts threaten our unity as rational agents. Good practical judgement (Plato's *sôphrosunê*, Aristotle's *phronêsis*) is needed to keep the three dimensions of rational life in harmony with one another. Every society has some conception, usually unconscious, of what such harmony should be, and education within it is primarily imparting this conception to the young.

In societies which are relatively isolated and tranquil, customs do not much conflict with one another. Members may be torn between the demands of self-interest, society and their friends, but not between different social demands. But once a society becomes multicultural its members encounter conflicts among the customs which shape the social dimension of their lives. These threaten not so much their unity as rational agents as their existence as social beings. They disrupt the unity of the whole society and call for political judgement in its leaders.

So far I have been speaking of societies and customs generally. How do religious customs and societies differ from those others we call 'secular'? Primarily by being taken from the Old Testament. The Jews at the time of Christ were a society with a complete set of customs for life, and no concept of religion. When they came into contact with a society with alien customs like the Greek custom of athletics, they simply rejected them and retained their own set of customs intact. Christ's immediate followers were all Jews and, if we are to believe the Acts of the Apostles and the Pauline Letters, they thought of themselves as continuing to be Jews: their identity as social beings was Jewish. They preserved much, though not all, of Mosaic law. But they dispensed with some central Jewish customs, notably circumcision and racial purity, and imposed the customs they retained upon new followers of Christ from other nations. It was this that ultimately gave rise to our present concept of religion and our distinction between what is and what is not religious. The Jewish customs which Christ's followers retained, and the beliefs which rationalised them, were those that much later came to be called 'religious.' They provided our paradigm. To put it formally, religious beliefs and practices are those parts of a culture which resemble those that Christians took from the Jews. That we think religion has to do with the supernatural is a consequence of the Jewish belief that the whole natural order depends on a personal creator outside it, and the Jewish hostility to what we think of as nature-cults. It would probably not have been part of our concept if Greek culture, in which the gods are part of the natural order, had been wedded with that of India or China.

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The followers of Christ, both Jewish and gentile, must have found their existence as social beings fragmented. Those of Jewish ethnicity caused disunity within the Jewish nation and, were eventually, it seems, expelled from it. Those of gentile birth had to forego much of what had been their lives as social beings. It was only after perhaps twelve years, at Antioch, that they acquired a distinct social identity as Christians. It took centuries for them to blend Roman jurisprudence with the Jewish conception of laws as divine commands, and to fit gentile celebrations of the seasons, focussed upon gods that were part of the natural order, with Judaeo-Christian celebrations informed by the idea of a person not part of it but intervening in it. For three centuries Christians were a society within the society of the Roman Empire, and it is part of our concept of a religious belief or value that it belongs to a society within a larger society with different values and supporting beliefs.

By the sixth century the Empire was Christian, society and Christianity were one and the same, and the religious and secular were no more distinguished than they had been in ancient Greece or Israel. After the seventh century Christians and Jews survived as sub-societies in the Islamic world, but they had no part in public life and were perhaps chiefly conceived as ethnic minorities. Jews were a nation, and Christians were often referred to as Greeks or Romans.

A sub-society with practices and supporting beliefs at variance with those of the whole society is a source of disunity. The officers of any society have a duty to preserve its unity, and in the end they try to impose their own values on the sub-society either by depriving its members of civil rights or by prosecution. In Western Europe before the Reformation vocal or active opposition to the established values was prosecuted as 'heresy'. In England from 1559 to 1829 Parliament tried to impose a compromise between Catholicism and Calvinism, but failed to unite the English people, let alone the four 'British' peoples, in the Church of England. 'Parliament made the Church of England, and Parliament will unmake the Church of England.' Disraeli put these words into the mouth of an unattractive character,¹⁸ but we see them becoming true today. The British government is now in 'British values' offering a new compromise, and trying to penalise 'vocal or active opposition' to it as 'extremism'.

In the Wars of Religion the beliefs and values of both sides were recognised as religious. Western politicians now tend to call those they favour 'secular' and those of sub-societies at variance with

¹⁸ *Lothair* (1870), Chapter 48.

them 'religious', as if the opposition were between the religious and the secular. This goes uncriticised because Christianity is the paradigm of religion, and many Western advocates of the 'secular' package are more or less averse to Christianity. Nevertheless so-called secular beliefs and practices concern the same things as those counted as religious; it is not their content that distinguishes one lot from the other.

The customs most integral to social life are those concerning birth, death, procreation and education. Christian practice about birth is rationalised partly by the dogmatic belief that life begins at conception, that from the moment at which an ovum is fertilised by a spermatozoon and splits in two, the two resulting cells form a very young human being. This belief is backed by medical research – the resulting cells form something the life and growth of which is determined by the genes inherited from the parents – and aspires to truth. It is, however, disputed today because the concept of a human being is problematic, and those who hold embryos to be human beings do so not just as individuals interested in biology but as social beings. Biologists have fairly clear concepts of a species and species-membership; but the notion of life is not, paradoxical as that may sound, purely biological; it belongs to philosophy. It is for philosophers of science to distinguish the notion of life which applies to cells from that which applies to members of a species, and for moral philosophers to tackle questions about human beings which do not arise about unhatched goose-chicks or new-born kittens. The questions whether a human embryo or neonate is just an aggregate of cells, and whether it is an actual or merely a potential human being, belong less to biology than to ethics. If the belief that embryos are young human beings is to be described as religious, and a matter of 'faith', so should the belief which rationalises abortion, that they are either just living tissue like areas of skin or complete living organisms of some non-human species.

As regards death, Christians believe that it is wrong to kill yourself, and have often introduced laws forbidding suicide. These laws have sometimes been defended by the dogmatic belief (shared by Socrates in Plato's *Phaedo* 62) that a life is a gift of God, but other considerations are adduced too: the effect of killing yourself on your family and friends, the mutability of moods of depression or despair and so on. Christians also hold that killing any human being is wrong except when there is some good reason for thinking otherwise. They have counted different things as good reasons at different times; but they jibe at mercy-killing. Suicide has ceased to be illegal in many countries and Mary Warnock, a philosopher in the

House of Lords, has suggested that we actually have a duty to kill ourselves or ask others to kill us when keeping us alive costs society more than we can put into it.¹⁹ The British regularly put beloved pets 'to sleep' out of pity, and the belief is gaining ground that doctors should kill demented old people and severely handicapped neonates who are incapable of making a choice about the matter if their lives are judged 'not worth living'. This practice in hospitals can be rationalised by a new conception that is emerging of a person as an organism with sufficient capacities to make rational choices.

Most societies in the past had customs of celebrating in a public way contracts between a man and a woman for procreating and rearing children. Christians approve of such contracts and favour giving them legal privileges and protection. In many Western countries same-sex contracts are now celebrated in the same way and given the same legal protection and privileges, including the right to adopt children. The belief which rationalises this is that males and females differ in no way which makes it right to treat them differently. This is certainly not a traditional belief or 'value', but it is now being imposed. In Britain discriminating in business dealings between same-sex and heterosexual couples now exposes individuals to prosecution, and organisations which supply social services but which are affiliated to religions that require them to discriminate have been suppressed.

Customs relating to sex vary dramatically. Many societies accept polygamy. In some endogamy is approved and sexual relations permitted between brother and sister, uncle and niece and other closely related pairs. Some societies criminalise adultery, in others it is thought hospitable to offer your sexual partner to a guest. Christians have regularly banned bestiality, polygamy, incest and homosexuality between men – the position over lesbianism is less clear than is sometimes supposed. They frown upon adultery and also on divorce and all sex outside marriage: exclusive and indissoluble monogamy is their ideal. These moral beliefs have been reflected in law, though not everywhere to the same extent. Some laws enacted when the West was Christian are still in force: laws against incest and polygamy for example. But many have been abrogated while new laws about the age of consent and sex with persons under it have been introduced.

The bodily sensations of sex are a matter of nature, not custom; customs and laws govern the way in which people seek sexual

¹⁹ Warnock, M. (2008). 'A duty to die?' *Omsorg*. Nordisk tidsskrift for palliativ medicin 4: 3–5.

pleasure. The beliefs that rationalise our laws at present are partly dogmatic and partly moral. It is thought conducive to mental and bodily health to engage in sex and unhealthy to suppress sexual desire or refrain from gratifying it either alone or with willing partners. This belief is dogmatic to the extent it aspires to factual truth, though one might wonder if the medical support for it justifies the advice actually given to young people today. It resembles the belief that the selfish pursuit of personal wealth has a trickle-down effect which benefits all members of society. Although that was advanced as factual truth by Mandeville in his *Fable of the Bees* (1714) and Adam Smith in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) it has been questioned when used to advocate unregulated laissez faire capitalism. The advice that sexual satisfaction should be sought outside marriage as well as within it conflicts with traditional Christian teaching; but it has religious associations. In Euripides's *Hippolytus* Aphrodite smashes (*sphallô*, line 6) Hippolytus for despising sex. Perhaps the thought that abstinence is dangerous rationalised the provision of temple prostitutes in what anthropologists count as fertility cults. Honouring Aphrodite did not require believing that there actually existed a person such as Homer depicts in the *Iliad*.

But societies always put some brakes on sex, and it is now thought extremely bad for adults to have sex with persons under the legal age of consent, an age we keep raising. This is a comparatively new 'value'. In Christian societies in the past girls married once they reached menarche; Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* Act 1 Scene 3 is thirteen. But as social beings we need to share with people around us abhorrence of certain deeds as specially horrific. The Greeks had Clytemnestra's killing her husband and Oedipus's sleeping with his mother. We have school teachers taking to bed their fifteen-year-old pupils.

All societies transmit their culture by education but education varies considerably from society to society. Many societies have done without schools, and in many literacy and numeracy have not existed at all or not been thought useful to everyone. Persian education allegedly consisted in learning to ride, shoot straight and tell the truth. A society, however, with a cash economy, in which people pay taxes, are subject to a forest of statutory requirements and travel extensively, would be impossible unless people are taught the 'three Rs', and we require children to be educated in them. There is no conflict here with Christianity. Schools and book-learning are Christian 'values'. After the collapse of the Western Roman Empire Christian monks kept literacy alive and throughout the Middle Ages the clergy provided schools and

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institutes of higher education. Tension may arise, however, if a Government should insist that schools teach 'values' which run counter to Christian ethics.

The chief dogmatic belief (it belongs, at least, to the philosophy of language, not to moral philosophy) that goes with such 'values' is that religious beliefs whether dogmatic or practical are neither true nor false, neither right nor wrong, neither (as a pragmatist like William James or the Protagoras of Plato's *Theaetetus* might say) expedient nor inexpedient. Some people think that religious beliefs are all false, but only because they call the positive beliefs like the belief that there *is* a life after death or that it is *wrong*, when commanded, to offer incense to the Emperor, 'religious' and the contradictory beliefs 'non-religious' or 'secular'. That is a verbal decision. The practical beliefs called 'religious' play the same part in people's lives as the 'secular' beliefs that conflict with them. What about the dogmatic beliefs?

First, they rationalise certain social activities like frequenting churches or temples. If people think them false, the activities will be dropped. But since as social beings we need collective activities, they will leave a gap and other activities must be found to replace them.

Secondly, we know that there is life after the age of fourteen, even though not everyone attains it, and we attach high priority to preparing children to thrive in it. Similarly if we think there is life after death and we reason like Socrates in Plato's *Phaedo* we shall attach high priority to preparing ourselves to be happy in it. Many educated Western people give no priority to this because they think death is the end. This difference in dogmatic belief is bound to lead to differences not only in what people themselves do, but in how they think others should be educated and society organised.

Less obvious but no less important, I quoted Julian Huxley's definition of religion, that it is the reaction of a person as a whole to the universe as a whole. It has the implication that every integrated person has a religion. Although it does not bring out the essentially social character of religion, I argued that human beings, through living in society, have a conception of the natural order prior to anything we count as scientific enquiry. They may not put this conception into words, but it will be reflected in their reaction to natural events. Academics may cherish the dream of reducing natural science to mathematics and explaining natural phenomena using only concepts belonging to arithmetic and geometry. But nobody could live thinking of night and day, summer and winter and plants and animals solely in such terms. Even if we believe that the

natural order did not come into existence for any purpose and that there is, in reality, no purpose anywhere in it, if we are to react to natural events at all and not just let them wash over us, we must attribute purpose to ourselves: we must think the events conducive to or obstructive of our purposes. In practice those who say that the natural order has no purpose usually go on to speak of it in terms applicable only to purposive agents: 'ruthless selfishness' 'as indifferent to our hopes as to our sufferings' 'an overwhelmingly hostile universe'.²⁰ Someone who really thinks the universe hostile will fight against it and hasten to leave it or treat its contents with hatred or contempt. Someone less pessimistic might reflect that since we have come into existence the universe must be as it would be *if* it had been ordered by a creator for our benefit. But if this is to justify seeing beauty in its contents and treating them with respect we must also have faith that it will continue to be ordered *als ob* it had this purpose.

What is now called 'atheism', the view that the natural order has no source outside it, but exists and continues to exist comes into by its own power ('of itself', *a se*, as theologians have said of the Judaeo-Christian God), or that earlier phases in its existence cause later,²¹ is what is traditionally called 'pantheism'. It is indistinguishable from Stoic pantheism. Chrysippus held that 'the universe [*kosmos*] alone is self-sufficient [*autarkhes*].' Sextus Empiricus reports the Stoics as reasoning that it has always existed, that 'the power that moves and orders it to generations and changes' must be eternal, 'and therefore God'.²² Cicero and Seneca understood the Stoics as holding that God is the world itself or its mind, and identified it with the common nature of all things or necessity.²³ The Stoics did have the necessary faith. In the early twentieth century intellectuals sometimes identified the laws of nature with God, and Whitehead defined 'the supreme God of rationalised religion' as the 'entity

²⁰ Quotations from Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), 2–3; Jacques Monod, *Chance and Necessity*, tr. Austryn Wainhouse (Glasgow: Collins, 1972), 165; and Steven Weinberg, *The First Three Minutes* (Glasgow: Fontana 1978), 148. The tendency to reintroduce purpose by the back door is fully documented by Mary Midgley in *Evolution as a Religion* (London: Methuen, 1985) and other books.

²¹ So J.L. Mackie in *The Cement of the Universe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 156, 221.

²² For documentation, see A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 46 E, 44 C.

²³ Long and Sedley, 54 B; Seneca, *Natural Questions*, Preface 13.

whereby the indetermination of mere creativity is transmuted into a determinate freedom.²⁴

As social beings we need collective acts and celebrations. To replace traditional worship the state may offer public holidays to celebrate events in its own history like becoming independent, winning a war or having a revolution; it may cause large pictures of the head of state to be publicly displayed or devise ritual acts like saluting a flag. This is the modern equivalent of burning incense before a statue of the Emperor. No dogmatic belief need be attached to it, but it can be rationalised by saying (what is true up a point) that the state is the source of life of the citizens, and then classified as a form of state-worship. In ancient Greece athletic festivals like the Olympic Games involved rites we count as religious. We have revived the Olympics, and rites are emerging and vast stadia springing up everywhere for festivals of spectator sport. Steven Weinberg's admiration for science leads him to call supercolliders 'the cathedrals of our age'.²⁵ Athletic stadia could be described as cathedrals for nature-worship, and working out in public gymnasia and going on solitary runs compared to church-going and solitary devotions like saying the rosary.

Those who advocate the values they call 'secular' themselves, like Christians, belong to a society, though one that as yet has little conscious identity since the culture of its members, though they do not realise it, is mainly that of Christian Europe; they have the same educational background and social status as their Christian adversaries. Like Christianity after Constantine it is a sub-society with an increasing influence in the state as a whole. Far from admitting, however to a religion of their own, they claim that they favour diversity of religions, that difference and multiculturalism are themselves values.

Praise for difference is natural for minorities that feel themselves different from the majority. Among persons who do not, it may betray a sentimental hankering after colourful crowd scenes in distant cities like those portrayed in early Hollywood movies and the adventures of Tintin. But what serious liberal thinkers want is not a plurality of different intermediate societies but a plurality of different individuals. Lady Warnock proposes the following ideal for human beings:

They are able not only to pursue the things they have learned to value highly and avoid those they have learned to hate (as laboratory rats do), but they can form pictures for themselves of the

²⁴ *Science and the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926), 250.

²⁵ So Mary Midgley, *Are You An Illusion* (Durham: Acumen, 2014), 4.

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universe as a whole and the part they would wish to play in it. They can give themselves goals to pursue, which may be totally new and idiosyncratic, or which they have learned from people they have, unpredictably, met or read about, admired or loved. It is this ability to set new goals, newly invented or traditional, but, either way, taken on individually by the unique human being, which lies at the root of ethics, and remains untouched by the genetic inheritance each may have.²⁶

This passage may be compared with Isaiah Berlin's account of what he calls 'the "positive" sense of the word "liberty"'. It derives, he says:

From the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master. I wish my life and decisions to depend on myself, not on external forces of whatever kind. I wish to be the instrument of my own, not of other men's, acts of will ... I wish, above all, to be conscious of myself as a thinking, willing, active being, bearing responsibility for his choices and able to explain them by reference to his own ideas and purposes. I feel free to the degree that I believe this to be true.²⁷

Lady Warnock is expressing Berlin's 'positive' conception of freedom. Freedom as 'negatively' conceived, he says, is acting or refraining from action just as you please without interference from other people, and includes choosing, like Gryllus, the life of a pig: it is freedom *from* something, namely constraint. Freedom positively conceived, in contrast, consists in realising to the full your human capacities: it is freedom *to* something, namely to grow into some kind of ideal being.

Fundamentally the same conception is advocated by the Catholic Church, though Catholics have a distinctive idea of how it is to be achieved.

In human society what is truly to be called liberty consists not in acting as you please ... but in this: that civil laws make it easier for you to live in accordance the precepts of eternal law.²⁸

²⁶ *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Ethics* (London: Duckbacks 2001), 147.

²⁷ *Two Concepts of Liberty* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), 16.

²⁸ *Libertas Praestantissimum*, Encyclical of Leo XIII (1888); see Denzinger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion* (Rome: Herder 1976), s.3249. The Church accepted Gratian's identification (*Decree*, Distinction 1) of natural law as defined in Roman jurisprudence with Mosaic law, and gave the name 'eternal law' to both.

God willed that man ... might of his own accord seek his creator and freely attain his full and blessed perfection by cleaving to him. Man's dignity therefore requires him to act out of conscious and free choice, as moved and drawn in a personal way from within ... Man gains such dignity when, ridding himself of all slavery to the passions, he presses onward towards his goal by freely choosing what is good.²⁹

Human freedom is a force for growth and maturity in truth and goodness; it attains its perfection when directed towards God.³⁰

The difference is that whereas Lady Warnock takes her ideal from Mill and the liberal Enlightenment tradition, and thinks we can achieve it by our own individual efforts, Catholics take theirs from the Judaeo-Christian tradition and think they can achieve it only with God's help.

Berlin points out that people can form and achieve ideals of positive freedom in societies where negative freedom is quite severely restricted, and that when the leaders of a society embrace an ideal of positive freedom they may impose restrictions on the negative freedom of citizens who do not share it for their own good. In liberal democracies today the state in fact, for the good of its citizens, intervenes in nearly every part of their lives.

The attempt to create a multicultural society by education is not only self-deceptive but self-defeating. Politicians should be warned by Mill. Arguing against letting schools and universities be controlled by the state, he says:

A general State education is a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another; and as the mould in which it casts them is that which pleases the predominant power in the government, ... it establishes a despotism over the mind.³¹

Diversity and originality among individuals depends upon the society in which they live. If the only practical values are the cult of diversity and choosing the sort of person you want to be, minds will be blank.

A unified state can accommodate eccentric habits and beliefs that citizens hold as individuals; the trouble comes from beliefs that they hold as social beings, members of sub-societies, Rousseau's

²⁹ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* (7 December 1965) s. 17.

³⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman 1999) s. 1731.

³¹ *On Liberty*, 130.

‘sociétés partielles’,³² that is, tribes, ethnic communities, families and religions. Could a modern state allow parents complete freedom to educate children as they please or not at all? Could it leave it to intermediate societies to provide all health care and all other social services as the Church did in the medieval West? If the people of a state all have civil rights and choose legislators who in turn control administration, sub-societies will press for their customs to be enshrined as universally binding laws, not out of hunger for power but because they think them good.

Plato in his *Statesman* warns against conceiving good government in a sovereign state on the model of looking after herds of animals. A shepherd does everything for his sheep, whereas no one does everything for the citizens of a sovereign state. There are many people besides officers of state who look after human societies: doctors, teachers, food producers and so on. And a shepherd manages his sheep by coercion – he uses dogs – whereas human beings want not to be coerced but persuaded. The simple model would work only if rulers were more godlike (*theioteiroi* 271 e) than their subjects, as we are more godlike than sheep, and if they were, people would be infantilised, as they would have been in the Golden Age of Cronos (272 b–d) – the Greek mythical equivalent of the Garden of Eden before Adam and Eve acquired moral responsibility and had provide for themselves. Good government is something complicated, and one element in it – Plato compares it to one syllable in a difficult polysyllabic word – is bringing together in the offices of state people of two different temperaments, quick, forceful people and gentle intellectual people, rather as weaving is combining hard, tight warp threads with soft, flexible weft threads. Plato was talking of Greek city states, which were relatively homogeneous, but his point holds a fortiori for multicultural societies. A human farmer can manage a mixed farm containing sheep, cows, pigs and geese. What would happen if an animal attempted that task is vividly depicted in Orwell’s *Animal Farm*. Making a success of a multicultural state would require rulers blessed with a culture superior to all the constituent sub-cultures.

In many parts of the world outside Europe tribes survive as a social reality and present serious obstacles to any national government with democratic aspirations. In the West ethnic communities are multiplying with which national governments have found no way of dealing. Families might seem less of a threat, and politicians often speak as

³² *The Social Contract* 2. 3. Rousseau calls banning them ‘the unique and sublime institution of the great Lycurgus’.

though they favoured them – despite the belief, always current among liberals, that most of the world's troubles would vanish if the poor had fewer children. But Mill, when he says 'liberty is often granted when it should be withheld,' particularly advocates more control of 'family relations'.³³ The state, he thought, has a duty to protect children against parents. Darwin's account of primal hordes dominated by tyrannical fathers,³⁴ cited and expanded by Freud,³⁵ has probably captured many educated imaginations. And when Fustel de Coulanges in his influential *The Ancient City* (1864) said 'Religion was the constituent principle of the ancient family',³⁶ he thought he was explaining the badness of a bad institution.

Intentionally or inadvertently, governments favour measures that weaken families. In the United Kingdom the state takes over the traditional responsibilities of families. Birth and death normally occur in state-funded hospitals and home births and deaths arouse protest. Families in the past reared children and looked after old members when they became physically or mentally incapable. Families can now be relieved of old people altogether, children get deposited at an early age in state-funded play-groups, and home education is allowed only under strict conditions. Most children attend state schools where they are taught what politicians decree. Despite his objections to having the state itself provide schools and universities, Mill recommended that it should require 'all children, and beginning at an early age' to undergo annual public examinations in a 'gradually extending range of subjects' which include religion, politics and 'other disputed topics'. The examinations on these topics 'should not turn on the truth or falsehood of opinions, but on the matter of fact that such and such an opinion is held, on such grounds, by such authors, or schools, or churches.' Beyond the acquisition of an unspecified 'minimum of general knowledge' the examinations should be voluntary, but the state 'may very properly offer to ascertain and certify that a person possesses the knowledge requisite to make his conclusions on any given subject worth attending to.' This system is now in place. It is rationalised by the dogma that all opinions on 'disputed topics' are equally true or false. Mill thought that schools, in addition to providing the 'religious education' he prescribes, might be allowed to do what he called 'teaching religion', that

³³ *On Liberty*, 128.

³⁴ *The Descent of Man*, (2 Vols., London, 1871), 2 362–3.

³⁵ *Totem and Taboo* (London: Hogarth Press 1986), 124–5, 141–2.

³⁶ *The Ancient City*, translated Willard Small (Boston: Lothrop 1871), 49.

is, teaching the religion of a child's family;³⁷ but that is now threatened by increasingly draconian measures against what is called 'radicalisation'.

The state's assuming of responsibility for the young, the old and the sick is popular with electorates because responsibilities are irksome. But it leaves parents in free societies with little more control over their children than they would have enjoyed as slaves. Their role is reduced to that of 'carers', extended families are superfluous, and the contribution of family traditions to the social identity of individuals is diminished.

Nuclear families are weakened by easy divorce, by making 'protected' sex a value for the unmarried, (more acceptable, certainly, as a way of controlling population, than forbidding marriage to the poor altogether 'unless the parties can show they have the means of supporting a family',³⁸) and by offering the legal protection which was formerly restricted to heterosexual couples wishing to produce and rear new members for the society to amorous couples generally. Marriage becomes no more than an erotic friendship between individuals. Such a friendship, however, is not a society for life, and marriage has traditionally been a relationship not just between individuals but, more threateningly, between families.

As to religion, Rousseau emphatically condemned a simple separation of church and state such as exists in France and the United States: it 'gives men two codes of legislation'.³⁹ In England the Church of England is still established by law, bishops sit in the House of Lords, and heads of state are crowned in Westminster Abbey. Religious institutions and schools are still assumed to be charities and receive tax relief. But people are pressing to deprive them of this status and remove state funding from any organisation providing social services that is under religious control. Schools originally set up in order that the culture of parents with a particular religious affiliation should be transmitted to their children are being required to take an increasing proportion of children from other cultures. The recent Commission on Religion and Belief in Public Life, though it gives itself the title 'Living with Difference', recommends removing Christian symbols and prayers from public life. And more positively it calls for a 'statement of the principles and values which foster the common good and should underpin and guide public life' which would form the basis for a curriculum compulsory in schools for

³⁷ *On Liberty*, 131.

³⁸ Favoured by Mill, *On Liberty*, 132.

³⁹ *Social Contract* 4. 8.

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pupils to the age of nineteen. It also calls for 'guidelines on matters of religion and belief' in the training of 'staff employed in higher education' and a new 'core element in all media training courses'. Its proposals if carried out, would give 'secular' values a status like that enjoyed not long ago by Communist ideology in the Soviet Bloc.

At worst, multiculturalism is a sham, at best a will o' the wisp. Bernard Williams said in a recent essay:

There must be, on any showing, limits to the extent to which the liberal state can be disengaged on matters of ethical disagreement. There are some questions, such as that of abortion, on which the state will fail to be neutral whatever it does.⁴⁰

The Test Act of 1673 prescribed that no one 'shall bear any office or offices civil or military, or receive any pay, salary or fee,' or 'have command or place of trust from or under his majesty' without declaring 'I do believe that there is not any transubstantiation in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper.' This Act excluded Catholics from civil and military offices. Today people unwilling to assist in abortions and 'assisting to die' are finding it difficult to get employment, let alone promotion, in the National Health service, and we may reach a situation in which no one may bear any office or receive any pay, salary or fee in the health service who will not declare: 'There no procedure, permitted by law, in which I would be unwilling to participate.'

No politician likes to be called intolerant, but Williams may be right when, in speaking of 'strong convictions on important matters' he says:

Perhaps toleration will prove to have been an interim value, serving a period between a past when no one had heard of it and a future in which no one will need it.⁴¹

— a past like the period before Christianity was heard of or like the time after it had become the state religion of Europe, and a future when the customs of a would-be liberal Western sub-society are the state religion of the world. If politicians are patient and tactful, people in other sub-societies may, Williams hopes, 'let their values decay.'

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⁴⁰ 'Tolerating the intolerable', in *Philosophy as a Humanist Discipline* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 131.

⁴¹ *Op.cit.*, 134