MORALITY WITH AND WITHOUT GOD

Terence Thomas

It began with a lie. Perhaps not a big lie, at least I didn't think so at the time, but a lie nevertheless. My Vicar had taken me for an interview with our Bishop following my application, supported by him, to undergo ordination training. My Vicar had prepared me well except that he never warned me that I would be asked if I was sure that I had a vocation. I had to hazard a guess at what this question meant. I wanted to be a clergyman like the Vicar and I sensed that if I answered: "No", to the bishop's question, I probably wouldn't be proceeding much further. So I said "Yes", not really knowing what I was committing myself to. Later I worked out that the question was meant to reassure the bishop that I had had a word from God. At the end, many, many years later, when I admitted to myself that there really wasn't a god, it was the same question that rose up to meet me. By then I had to admit that I had never, ever had a word from God.

I grew up in a conventional, working class family in rural West Wales. My mother was ambitious for me, wanting me to go to Oxford and such like, but the home environment didn't give me any signposts as to how this could be achieved. I was attending the local grammar school during World War II with little idea of how to study or how to have an ambition. As I approached school leaving age, at 15 years then, I thought I would like to be a policeman and I became a police cadet a few days after my sixteenth birthday.

It didn't take me long to realise that this was a mistake so I left to become a farm worker on the family farm. I joined the Young Farmers' Club the only outlet for any intellectual stimulus and that only made me more dissatisfied as I saw my grammar school contemporaries going to

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teacher training colleges and universities. I knew I could have been one of them. But how was I to realise this late found ambition. By now I was in my early twenties.

The only model of a university product I knew was our Vicar. I admired him. He was a scholar and always engaged me in conversation like a scholar. I decided to try to become a clergyman like him. I was already an accomplished public speaker through the Young Farmer's Club, I was a regular in the church, taking part in all the church Bible festivals and showing my proficiency in answering questions on the scriptures.

The next step was not that easy since I had left school without matriculating which was the fashion in those pre-Education Act days. There was a liberal arts college within easy distance, which, being a private, church-backed institution had its own matriculation arrangements. So I spent a year doing correspondence courses through Wolsey Hall, Oxford. I sat the examinations and I matriculated. I had to spend a further year on the farm to meet military conscription regulations, a year which I spent preparing for a college scholarship which I duly won, and entered the college as a mature student.

So far so good but then problems began. In my home parish the religious choice was between church and a variety of nonconformist chapels, not even a Roman Catholic church. In the college, the overwhelming majority of students, all male, were prospective clergymen like me. But there the likeness ended. The rest of them seemed to make up a whole alphabet soup of churchmanships, from extreme evangelical to hot high church. I was, at first bemused, and then confused. I didn't seem to belong in this melange. The more I tried to sort things out, inwardly moving up and down the ecclesiastical scale in my mind, the more I wondered if I had done the right thing. My big problem was that I thought myself trapped. I wanted a university education, qualification and a respectable profession and I knew of no other way than to stick it out.

I eventually graduated with a first class honours degree and I was encouraged by my vicar and a senior clergyman

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friend of his to seek entrance to Oxford. By this time I wanted it too and not just to please my mother. The senior clergyman advised me to seek entrance to an Oxford theological college with an evangelical reputation and admission through the college to a university institution and an Oxford degree. When I demurred he assured me that it was the best place to go to and I wouldn't be corrupted. So I entered on an Oxford theological degree and the accompanying theological training for the Anglican priesthood in an institution that did turn out to be a hotbed of evangelical fervour but with academically-minded staff.

As I progressed the problems increased, not merely on account of my ecclesiastical surroundings but also because of my difficulties with what I was studying. I desperately tried to find ways to balance what my reason was telling me with what I found in holy writ and in the formularies of the Anglican church. I found succour in various ways, most of them leading me in the direction of more liberal and more radical interpretations of the holy texts and of the history of the religion I was part of largely by discovering Rudolf Bultmann. A German-American theologian offered some light in my confusion. He was Paul Tillich. I came across a second-hand copy of one of his books in the main local bookshop. In the Preface he had written, and I paraphrase, 'it is not only the sinner *but also the doubter* who is justified by grace through faith'. The words are near enough Tillich's, and it is the italicised words that caught my mind. It was on the basis of this expression of Christianity that I laboured on. Full of doubt but working hard for the people I served in Wales and, for the best part of a decade, in India. I always consoled myself that I was giving everyone their money's worth.

In India I lived and occasionally worked among people of different religions to the one I professed. The experience had a lot to do with my change of perspective. One instance may demonstrate the dilemma. It was Christmas and I was at a Christian service held through the medium

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of the local language, Marathi. The preacher went to great lengths to demonstrate how Christianity differed from the dominant Hinduism around us. In particular he stressed the unique difference between the incarnation of Jesus Christ and the multiple avatāra of Hinduism. When he had finished we stood up to sing a Christmas hymn with a chorus that hailed the coming of God to earth. The only problem was the verb that referred to the coming down was the same verb as the root of the word avatāra. Was Christ's coming down to earth all that different from the Hindu avatāra? By the time I came to leave India Jesus Christ had, for me, ceased to be a unique divinity. As a student of the sociology of religion it wasn't the only example of the merging of the same phenomena in the different religions.

Most of my time in India was spent teaching in theological colleges. The courses I taught included scriptural studies, doctrinal studies and one course on Ethics. In this course I became acquainted with most of the movements and ethicists in the history of the subject. I had become interested in and attracted by the *Situation Ethics* of Joseph Fletcher in the mid-60s. His approach appeared to give me some liberality in the area of morals and remain within the Christian domain. Fletcher tried to move the emphasis in Christian ethics away from 'divine command ethics'. Years later he said that in situation ethics he offered religionists: 'a way out of rule ethics and its dilemmas, both theoretical and practical. It posited that the divine will is indeed that humans should act out of loving concern, but it then contended that this is God's *only* moral imperative – leaving it up to human beings as moral agents... to determine what the most loving thing would be in every situation, unencumbered by prejudicial rules. This they [the religionists] could not and would not do.' In the same essay Fletcher said that he had realised that: 'theology stands at the bar of ethics, that doctrine has to measure up to moral values, that religion depends on morality *and not vice versa*. This upset the theological claim

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that ethics needs a religious basis.' He added that Kai Nielsen's *Ethics Without God*, a book that has informed me more than most, was the work that gave him this standard.[1]

In teaching the Ethics course at college I also became acquainted with Utilitarianism. Again I felt a strong attraction to what I considered was an attempt to get away from 'divine command ethics'. I have read a great deal more on Utilitarianism in these latter philosophical years and I'm acquainted with the shortcomings pointed out by Bernard Williams and others. I cannot claim to be a wholehearted utilitarian but I believe, following R. M. Hare, that utilitarianism will always play some part in my understanding of ethics without God.

In 1971 I returned from India to a post in the Open University in the field of the History of Religions. The more time I spent in the study and teaching of various religions the more I felt myself distanced from the career I had known. One day I woke up and decided that there really was nothing to agonise about. There just was no God. The change was a great relief. I felt liberated. There was no hedging or havering. No thought of being an agnostic. I just was an atheist and that was it. I didn't tell anyone at first. As days went by I felt more and more sure that I had taken the right mental step.

Some time later I was invited to participate in a Welsh language TV programme on religion and politics. I explained to the presenter, a Christian theologian I knew well, that I was no longer a believer. This was my first admission to anyone beyond myself. He said that it was OK; he really wanted to take advantage of my experience as an ex-believer and experience of local and national politics. The programme included individual interviews. My interview, to camera, began with the theologian rehearsing the fact that I had recently become an atheist and could I explain that to the viewers. I was caught unawares. Quickly I answered: 'Well I spent over 50 years talking to someone I thought was out there and never had a reply, so I concluded that the only sensible conclusion was that there was no one there.'

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My experience was summed up neatly years later when William L. Rowe, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at Purdue University, U. S. A., a self-styled 'friendly atheist' and author of a number of books and articles on the problem of evil, was asked in an interview why he went to university to study to be a religious minister and left university an atheist. His reply was: 'It would be nice but simply untrue to say that my loss of faith in theism was compelled by the discovery of reasons showing that theism was false. . . .In my case it was chiefly the lack of genuine religious experiences, as well as some reasons to be sceptical about the Bible being the revealed word of God, that led to the erosion of my belief in the existence of God. Positive reasons for disbelief came later.'[2] We have exchanged e-mails since I read that and I have found him very encouraging and engaging as a fellow atheist.

My retreat from theism was gradual. For years I had grappled like William Rowe with doubts about the bases of the Christian faith and the fact that God had always remained silent in word and sign. Furthermore, having found a profession that liberated me from the shackles of the church I was free to be rather more objective.

The real challenges to faith began with the deaths of a number of female friends and colleagues. They were good people and each one died of some form of cancer. I began to give way to thoughts that the God claimed by Christians was anything but benevolent. If he existed at all he was a vindictive bastard. For me this became a moral weakness in God. I used to say: 'If I thought that I could live a moral life without God then I would become an atheist.'

Gradually, the more I pondered this matter the more I realised that I had already been adjusting my moral views to obviate the worst of what was deemed to be Christian ethics. Finally I thought that if someone could disprove the argument from design in the creation of the world that would be close to the final nail in the coffin of my theism. A colleague in the science faculty gave me a copy of Daniel Dennett's *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*. I read Darwinian evolution for the first time,

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read some science of cosmology, became convinced of the claims and almost the last vestige of faith was gone. The final nail was the realisation that it was not the case that God chose to hide himself, that the sinner could not look on the face of God. There was no *deus absconditus*, there was just no god to abscond.

Thereafter 'the positive reasons for disbelief' began to pile up. In my retirement I began to read philosophy seriously and the more I read the more confirmed I was in my mind that there is no god and that I was not bound to such a belief in order to live a moral life so far as I am able. I have spent some years now reading in the philosophy of religion. I have read philosophers from both sides of the divide, for and against god. Early on in this phase I read Julian Baggini's *Atheism: A Very Short Introduction*. It is a remarkable little book and served more than any other I have read before or since to confirm in me my rejection of belief in the supernatural and in particular in any god.

The books I have read in favour of belief in a god have failed to convince me so far. More than that the majority of them have argued in favour of God in ways that have reminded me time and again of what Pascal said about 'The God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob not of philosophers and scholars.' One leading theologian urged me to realise that God did not exist and therefore my atheism was incoherent. I replied that I knew my Tillich well but God's non-existence, contrasting with other 'things' that do exist, was no help to me when I faced devout Christians, including at least one bishop of the Church in Wales and a philosopher in the University of Wales, who believe that God *really* does exist.

One of the issues I had to face when I became an atheist was to work out how I would build an alternative structure of morality in the setting aside of religion. I had already seen myself as a Christian humanist and after some thought I realised that what I ought to do was substitute 'secular' for Christian, so I understood myself to be a

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secular humanist. The accents in this description were on both elements, secular as opposed to religious or Christian, and the humanist side developed further out of where I had been for some time.

As a basis of morality I thought what was needed was an understanding of what it meant to be human, to be fully human. The word human is related to terms like humane and humanitarian. By the last term I mean what my dictionary says, 'concerned with promoting human welfare'. I object strongly to a use that has grown up in recent years of talking of 'humanitarian disaster'. We may be talking of a human disaster but humanitarian means quite the opposite. So I saw my own life as dedicated to enhancing human potential, creating a fulfilled life for myself and others in my community, and generally being 'fully human'.

I believe that for all the evil that human beings bring about in the world that humanity is not to be defined by that evil. Rather humanity is to be defined by the good. *Those who believe that goodness only comes from a god are blind to the fact that humans have a notion of goodness that enables them to talk about a god's goodness else how could they decide that what a god demands is good? Invoking a god can add nothing to the enhancement of goodness in the world*. We don't need a god to tell us, if such a god were ever to speak, that torturing the innocent is wrong, that abusing children is wrong.

In any case in considering morality based on religious principles which religious principles are we to accept. When we talk of moral relativism, the examples we think of in the various relativisms are mostly religiously based. In our time we see attempts made to cover over the vast chasms that separate the different religions in our country. We hear a great deal of inter-faith activity. The facts of these matters are that Christians do not worship the same God as the Jews or the Muslims. How then can they claim that morality must be based on religion or God? Whose religion predominates, whose god predominates?

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Terence Thomas is a retired academic who now spends most of his time reading philosophy and engaging in philosophical discussions with retired people like himself in the University of the Third Age.

Notes

[1] Joseph Fletcher, 'Humanist Ethics: The Groundwork', ed. Morris B. Storer, *Humanist Ethics: Dialogue on Basics*, (Buffalo NY, Prometheus Books, 1980), p. 255.

[2] *Philosophy Now*, Aug/Sept, 2004, p.16.

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