

WITHOUT GOD ALL THINGS ARE LAWFUL

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Introduction

The Emmy Award winning TV writer/producer, Norman Lear, in 1992 addressed a Joint Faculty Seminar of the Harvard Divinity School and the Harvard Business School. In his presentation he argued that the traditional institutional sources of values in our society - the church, family, education and civil authority - have waned. He argued that business has now become "the fountainhead of values in our society", largely suppressing in the process "that mysterious inner life", what we refer to as "the spiritual life". Lear went on to say:

*"As a student of the American psyche, at no time in my life can I remember our culture being so estranged from this essential part of itself. One can see it in the loss of faith in leaders and institutions - the cynicism, selfishness, and erosion of civility - and the hunger for connectedness that stalks our nation today. How bizarre that there is such an unhealthy reticence in our culture generally, and in business and education and public life in particular, to discuss what may be the most distinctive trait of this remarkable creature, the human being" (Norman Lear, "The Cathedral of Business: The Fountainhead of Values in America Today" in *The New Oxford Review*, April 1993, 6 (6-13)).*

Lear goes on to cite the historian Lewis Mumford, who maintained that "Rome fell, not because of political or economic ineptitude - or even because of barbarian invasions. It collapsed through a 'leaching away of meaning and loss of faith.' Rome fell, he said, because of a 'barbarization from within'".

Coming from roughly the same direction, the international business consultant Charles Handy, in his challenging new book *The Empty Raincoat: Making Sense of the Future* (Hutchinson, 1994), puts it well with an apt and sobering reference to Vaclav Havel:

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"Vaclav Havel, the playwright turned president, could hardly be more immersed in worldly things and structures these days, but he has argued that we will only avoid 'mega-suicide' in our time if we rediscover a respect for something other worldly, something beyond ourselves. It is a paradox, he says, but without that respect for a superpersonal moral order, we will not be able to create the social structures in which a person can truly be a person" (The Empty Raincoat, op. cit., 4)

The Brothers Karamazov

The Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky was born in 1821 and died in 1881. The second of seven children, Dostoevsky was educated in an army engineering school but soon turned his hand to literature. As is the tradition in Eastern Europe, writers of note are also frequently respected as social and political critics. Witness, for example the part played in recent years by Alexander Solzhenitsyn in Russia and Vaclav Havel in Czechoslovakia.

Dostoevsky - like most in this tradition - ran foul of the authorities. He was imprisoned and sentenced to death in fact. Tied and blindfolded before the firing squad, he and his friends were given a reprieve by the Tsar seconds before the shots were fired.

Those shots would have deprived the world of Dostoevsky's masterpiece and one of the great pieces of world literature - *The Brothers Karamazov*. In that novel - as with all his major works - Dostoevsky addresses the critical issues of good and evil, God and immortality, freedom and responsibility. He forces us to ask some pressing questions: Where do we turn to find values that serve us well? Why is any human act "good" or "bad"? Or, to put the question more generally, where might we start if we are to respond with vision, creatively and effectively to what the times ask of us?

Fyodor, the father of the three Karamazov brothers, is murdered. The eldest son Dmitri is accused of the murder and there is much circumstantial evidence that eventually leads to his conviction. In fact the dim-witted servant Smerdyakov has killed Fyodor. Smerdyakov explains to Ivan, one of the three Karamazov brothers and the voice of atheism in the story, that he has done it for Ivan and is without guilt because

*"... 'all things are lawful'. That was quite right what you taught me, for you talked a lot to me about that. For if there's no everlasting God, there's no such thing as virtue, and there's no need of it. You were right there. So that's how I looked at it" (F. Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. C. Garnett, Random House, 1950, 768).*

Dmitri's younger brother, Alyosha, is a seminarian - a thoroughly good hearted and simple young man who wants only to think the best of people and do whatever he can to help them. Alyosha visits Dmitri in gaol. Dmitri, to this point a very angry and unstable character, has undergone a profound transformation and is quite willing to accept "responsibility" for the crime. *"A new man has risen up in me"* he says (op. cit., 719). *"We are all responsible for all. ... I go (to the mines in Siberia) for all, because someone must go for all"* (op. cit., 720).

Dmitri goes on to raise the key issue:

"It's God that's worrying me. That's the only thing that's worrying me. What if He doesn't exist? ... Then if He doesn't exist, man is the chief of the earth, of the universe. Magnificent! Only how is he going to be good without God? That's the question" (op. cit., 721).

In this, Dmitri echoes an earlier conversation with another visitor, Rakitin - an intellectual seminarian who is trying to explain evil away in terms of environment. Dmitri says of him:

"Rakitin does dislike God. Ough! doesn't he dislike him! That's the sore point with all of them. But they conceal it. They tell lies. They pretend. ... 'But what will become of men then?' I asked him, 'without God and immortal life? All things are lawful then, they can do what they like?'" (op. cit., 717).

"We Have Forgotten God"

Dostoevsky uses the story of a wild family and a brutal crime to put before us a most serious moral issue - an issue with profound social consequences. If "man is chief of the earth", if there is no ultimate reference point beyond us, then we are left on our own to decide what is "good". Left on our own in the cosmos, where do we stand as we address the enormous questions facing us today?

It might happen, in these circumstances, that certain people decide - implicitly or explicitly - that it is "good" to be kind, unselfish, caring, generous, self-sacrificing and compassionate. It might also happen that certain people decide - again implicitly or explicitly - that it is "good" to be selfish and greedy, "good" to promote one's own interests by destroying other people. And if we do not experience ourselves as grounded in some Universal, Objective Reality, who is to decide that the latter are wrong and how would that decision be made?

In his Commencement Address at Harvard in 1977, Alexander Solzhenitsyn spoke of "the spiritual exhaustion of the West". He attributed this to the fact that, in the thinking of the West, "man" had become the centre and pinnacle of reality. Thus, the wants of the human ego and the limits of technology become the measure of human action. The limits, in the end, are simply "what can be done" rather than "what it is good to do". Amidst this kind of environment, it becomes very difficult to convince people, for example, that it is not "good" to pursue a lifestyle or course of action that deprives others of their liberty or the bare necessities of life, or that does violence to others or the universe which is our home.

In 1983, Solzhenitsyn received the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion. When receiving that Prize he commented:

*"The great crisis of humanity today is that it has lost its sense of the invisible. We have become experts in the visible, particularly in the West. If I were called upon to identify briefly the principal trait of the entire twentieth century, I would be unable to find anything more precise and pithy than to repeat again and again: Men have forgotten God. The failings of a human consciousness deprived of its divine dimensions have been a determining factor in all the major crimes of this century" ("We Have Forgotten God", *The Tablet*, May 14, 1983).*

Solzhenitsyn is wont to point out, every time he has the opportunity, that a human consciousness not respectful of, and not grounded in, "the divine dimension", tends to become merely human-centred or ego-centred. And the logic of such ego-centricity is that all things may be lawful, depending on how we - or others who exercise power over us - think or feel about it at the time. All we have to do is decide that it is "good" or "right" - and it is!

Hitler Was a Good Man - Yes?

By any account, we would have to say what Hitler and his minions perpetrated was a gross moral evil. Under no circumstances can we justify it - or any of the other atrocities repeated this century with sickening regularity by totalitarian people from "the right" and "the left".

The welfare of the human family demands that we stand firmly against such behaviour and condemn it without reservation. Yet we have a problem if we leave the Transcendent out of the picture and try to find some moral ground from which to make the condemnation. This dilemma is brought out well by the Jesuit philosopher, Fr. Frederick Copleston. In 1948 he was invited to debate the question of God's existence with Bertrand Russell on BBC Radio. Copleston recalls:

*"You know I didn't much care for that debate. (Russell) thought that value judgment is simply the expression of emotion, attitude or something purely subjective, and that there is no absolute morality. I remember saying to him something like: 'I am sure, Lord Russell, that you would say it was absolutely wrong to behave in the way the guards in the German concentration camps behaved to the inmates.' He said: 'Of course, I would wish to say that that was absolutely wrong, but it doesn't fit in with my theory, so I am in rather a dilemma.' He said that in the original talk, but then when it came to preparing the script, he said: 'I can't say that in public, and toned it down'" ("A Philosopher's Testimony", *The Tablet*, December 8, 1984).*

The Unseeing Ophthalmologist

The American actor and film director, Woody Allen, has in his own particular way tried to address these same issues. In 1979 he commented in an interview with New York Times reporter Natalie Gittelson:

*"It's not a good time for society. It's a society with so many shortcomings - desensitised by television, drugs, fast-food chains, loud music and feelingless, mechanical sex. Until we find a resolution for our terrors, we are going to have an **expedient** culture, that's all - directing all its energies to coping with the nightmares and fears of existence, seeking nothing but peace, respite and surcease from anxiety" ("The Maturing of Woody Allen", *The New York Times Magazine*, April 22, 1979, p.32).*

In his film, "Crimes and Misdemeanors", Allen takes up the theme of morality more specifically. A young Rabbi has a disease of the eyes and is slowly going blind. He seeks assistance from an ophthalmologist, a very wealthy and well respected man in the community, with a lovely wife and two bright grown up children. The ophthalmologist is the archetypal "successful person".

However, he has committed a crime and wants to speak with the Rabbi about what he should do. The Rabbi suggests he face the truth and seek forgiveness. Since this threatens the "successful life" he has established, he cannot contemplate that. The Rabbi, a very gentle, good man, speaks to him of his faith in God and the forgiveness that is available. The ophthalmologist has only dim memories of God, not enough to motivate a serious moral decision.

The Rabbi tells him that if there is no God there can be no morality. Ironically, the ophthalmologist sees the truth of this but chooses to live as if there were no God - even though, as he himself says later, "without God, life is a cesspool". Ironically, the blind Rabbi sees more clearly than the expert in seeing.

The Less Moral, The More Litigious

There is, if you like, an inescapable logic implicit here. It goes something like this:

- When God (the Transcendent, the Ultimate, "the divine dimension") recedes from the consciousness of a society, that society has no ultimate or objective reference point for morality;
- When that happens, the society has no reason to be moral or no sure ground to determine a vision of what it ought to become;
- When it has no reason to be moral, no well-grounded vision of the future, it becomes more litigious (i.e. it places more and more emphasis on laws and law enforcement to achieve what, in a healthy society, is achieved by appealing to a moral sense);
- The more litigious it becomes, ironically, the more lawless it is likely to be in the end. "What can I get away with?" becomes the crucial question, "Don't get caught", the crucial law. To be truly law-abiding

people must first be moral, they must have a vision that gives context and purpose for the law.

Such a society has unrealisable expectations of its lawmakers and enforcers - especially the latter. Such a society will also breed strange sects and bizarre theories as people struggle to find some connectedness with a bigger Reality, a wider Order that will give vision and value to their lives. As Dostoievsky's contemporary, Friederich Nietzsche noted:

He who no longer finds what is great in God, will find it nowhere - he must either deny it or create it".

The Biblical Vision

The Bible does not *impose*, it *exposes*. That is, it reveals or unveils reality as it is. The Biblical Revelation invites us to reflect on who and what we are and live in fidelity to that.

One of the first truths unveiled for us in the Bible is that *we are necessarily religious*. The English word "religion" has its roots in the Latin word "ligo", meaning "to tie" or "to bind". We are made by God, in God's "image and likeness". We are as it were, "tied" to God. That is the way it is.

To think of the human person as "untied" from God is to distort the picture. "Untied", disconnected from our Origin, we lose any sense of our End. Only in the light of our End, our purpose as creatures, can we begin to understand what is "good" or "bad". A life-giving human vision demands a divine context.

The Bible also reveals that we humans are *in need of redemption*. There is something amiss. We know in our hearts we are made for more than this. Our ability to know and choose good from evil is not perfectly ordered. Our appetites and desires pull us in different directions. Despite our best efforts we sometimes choose the less creative over the more creative, the less loving over the more loving, the evil over the good.

In and of ourselves we are incapable of being entirely faithful to who and what we are. Only in Christ is that possible. Christ shows the way and enables us to pursue that through the power of His Spirit.

A truly Biblical morality is first and foremost about a relationship - a Covenant. In Christ we are called to progressively recover that original "tie" with a loving and personal God, faithful and merciful from generation to generation.

The Bible urges us to think of ourselves always in the context of that "tie" with the Divine Creator who made us in His own "image and likeness", always invited more deeply into the Covenant with the eternally merciful and compassionate God who "so loved the world He gave His only Son" (Jn. 3:16).

This thinking sets the context for all other thinking about what it means to be human, what it means to be good, any vision we might develop for our future. If we let it permeate our lives and relationships with other people, it allows us to make a creative contribution to our society that is crying out for a vision and values by which to live.

If we go to that society and simply try to *impose* "Christian values" - something that Jesus Christ never did - we will be doing a grave disservice to the message of Christ and the society to which we preach. If, on the other hand, we go to that society as caring men and women who, in the Spirit of Christ, expose the truth **by the way we live**, than we will offer them what they seek - a lifestyle that is redemptive and full of hope. As Paul VI noted in his remarkable Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1976):

"Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses"
(n.41).

A Problem Arising

We Christians have much to seek forgiveness for in this regard. As the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council wrote, "*believers themselves bear some responsibility*" for the fact that God has faded from the consciousness of our society (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, n.19). Again, Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, takes this acknowledgement further when he notes that the Church herself must first be evangelised (cf. n.15). The fact that our world has turned from God might say more about us who claim to be God's representatives than it says about the world. I have not yet met the atheist who has not found confirmation of his or her atheism in the attitudes and behaviour of believers.

When Pope Paul VI was Archbishop of Milan he spoke to Milanese Catholic Action on October 15th 1961. His words embody beautifully a humble recognition of what we are speaking about and a lifegiving response to it:

"I am determined to place those estranged from us in the front of my activity and my prayer. If there is a voice that can reach you, those of you who have left the Church, the first will be one that asks pardon of you. Yes, I of you. When I see one who has fallen away, there is much remorse. Why is this brother or sister estranged from me? Because he or she has not been sufficiently loved."

If we look at the evidence of people down through the ages - and particularly this century - we could be forgiven for concluding that the problem is not *lack* of religious belief but *religious belief as such*. Most recently, Serbian Chetniks have pursued their programme of "ethnic cleansing" under a flag bearing the inscription, together with a skull and cross bones, "*For God, the King and the Fatherland*". Pious rationalisations have been given by Christians down through the ages for their brutal and totally inexcusable treatment of the Jews. Perhaps more benignly, but still on the same spectrum of immorality, we could include much of the banal and arrogant public rhetoric coming out of the United States in recent years from the so called "radical right" under the heading of "belief in God".

However, the evidence is not as conclusive as it might seem. Judged by their own standards of belief in God, the actions of these people are blatantly immoral. Ironically, that judgement can *only* be made by reference to their belief in God. Only by reference to the Good can you speak of the evil. If they did not believe in the Eternally Good and Loving God, or, more particularly, if there was no Eternally Good and Loving God, we could not make that judgement. We would be left in the same dilemma in which Bertrand Russell found himself.

Clearly, very few of us practise what we say we believe. There is no necessary connection between belief and behaviour. This applies to believers and non-believers alike. Just as there are self-confessed atheists who are thoroughly good people, there are self-confessed believers who are thoroughly bad people. The issue is not whether we *say* we believe this or that. The issue is whether we *live* what we believe. And while an individual who denies any Transcendent reference point may be a thoroughly good person, it is hard to believe that a

whole society that has lost any practical sense of the Transcendent will find sufficient reason to develop a coherent vision by which to live creatively and effectively for long.

Recovering the Vision of the Church

Suppose we were to think of the current crisis in the Church - a crisis, incidentally, which she shares with social institutions and entire cultures throughout the world - as a normal part of the life cycle. Institutions, like individuals, must die repeatedly if they are to live. In this context, the tensions, uncertainties, conflicts, erosion of moral credibility, general moribundity of structures and ways that seemed so vibrant a short time ago, may be seen as nothing more nor less than a thoroughgoing purgation, a dying to those things that no longer serve the Good News. Such a purgation is a necessary prelude to new life, to being what the Church is called to be so that it can do what it is called to do. As the Second Vatican Council taught:

"Christ summons the Church, as she goes her pilgrim way, to that continual reformation of which she always has need, in so far as she is an institution of human beings here on earth" (Gaudium et Spes, n.6).

Like all organisations, the Church is subject to the besetting sin of bureaucracies: The means subvert the ends and the bureaucracy invests increasing amounts of energy and skill in simply maintaining itself as it is. The efforts directed at self-maintenance are probably in proportion to its forgetfulness of its *raison d'être*.

Perhaps the Church is being called to address its forgetfulness, think again about its vocation, hear anew the life and teaching of Jesus, the simple carpenter of Nazareth. The purgation must be actively promoted, not for its own sake, but for the sake of clarity of vision. We could do a lot worse than pray the simple prayer of the helpless blind beggar in the Gospel story: *"Let me see again"* (cf. Mk. 10:46-52).

Conclusion

In the Gospel of Matthew we find a piece of wisdom that might do much to guide us as we seek to recover the Gospel vision for the coming years. Jesus addressed it directly to His disciples:

"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men" (Mt. 5:13 - RSV).

The Australian poet Les Murray re-states it well for us in the light of our contemporary situation:

*"The time for ecclesiolatry, the worship of the visible church instead of God, is past. We're no longer free to indulge our bad habits of boring people, bullying them and backing up respectability; we're no longer in a position to call on the law to do for us what we should be doing by inspiration and example; we're no longer in a position to push second-rate thinking and an outworn picture of the cosmos, where God is Up, we are in the middle and Hell is Down; we're no longer free to indulge the internecine warfare of denominations that has so harmed God's cause on earth for the past four centuries; finally, we're not going to be universally accepted as a spiritual elite, so we'd better get on with being what our Founder told us to be which is salt of the earth, the baking-soda in the loaf of mankind. Salt and baking-soda aren't privileged substances, but they're pretty essential ones" (Les Murray, "Some Religious Stuff I Know About Australia" in D. Harris et al, *The Shape of Belief In Australia Today*, Lancer Books, 1982, 28).*

The Church, like any society, is bound to become litigious and eventually lawless, if it loses its roots in the Transcendent. A self-focused, self-maintaining Church is a tragic absurdity. It has no good reason to exist. Our vision for the twenty first century has to be essentially what it was for the first century. By our genuine love for people and this world in which we find ourselves, we become a sign of God's love. We are enabled to fulfil this vocation because we are in Christ, daily fostering our intimacy with Him in all things. We humbly accept our identity as salt, confident that in that salt Christ will be present to our world and bring

about its redemption. All that we do or do not do, all that we say or do not say, must be submitted to this extraordinarily ordinary calling.

If we are to contribute what we may to this world, we will not do it simply by telling people if they do not take God seriously the outlook is grim, true and all as that might be. We will do it by first of all taking God seriously ourselves - yes, even more seriously than we take the Church. For better or worse, people tend to listen to those who seem to offer a more viable alternative to the one they presently experience. And we will not offer a viable alternative to materialism and Godlessness, unless we behave like genuine friends of Him who was friend to the poor and destitute, the tax collector and sinner.