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A Religious Basis of Liberal Democracy



Abstract: There exists a sentiment that persons of deep religious faith can be, at best, only halfheartedly committed to liberal democracy. (“All religion is toxic to the liberal project, something we should have learned from the events of September 11, 2001.... Enlightenment rationalism, not religion, made liberal democracy possible.”)¹ In fact, many religious believers, no less than nonbelievers, enthusiastically affirm the political morality of liberal democracy. Moreover, as I illustrate in this essay, countless religious believers affirm the political morality of liberal democracy partly on the basis of their religious faith.

1. INTRODUCTION

Not every country that has presented itself as a democracy is in fact a democracy. Two examples are North Korea, whose official name, translated into English, is the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, and East Germany, whose name translates as the German Democratic Republic.² Furthermore, not every country that can plausibly portray itself as a democracy³ is a liberal democracy, a democracy committed, first, to the

This essay draws on material that appears in my forthcoming book, *The Political Morality of Liberal Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹ This is how Thomas F. Farr summarizes such a sentiment—which he rejects—in his book *World of Faith and Freedom: Why International Religious Liberty Is Vital to American National Security* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. xi.

² See Kenneth Roth, “Despots Masquerading as Democrats,” in *Human Rights Watch, World Report 1:7* (2008); Associated Press, “Report Says Democracies Enable Despots,” *New York Times*, January 31, 2008.

³ For a “modest” definition of democracy, see Andrew Koppelman, “Talking to the Boss: On Robert Bennett and the Counter-Majoritarian Difficulty,” *Northwestern University Law Review* 95 (2001), pp. 955–957. Koppelman quotes Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper, 1950), which he finds “entirely free of... mushy sentimentalism about majoritarianism” (p. 956). See also

proposition that each and every human being has inherent dignity and is inviolable, and second, to certain human rights against government—that is, lawmakers and other government officials—such as the right to freedom of religion.⁴ The union of the two most widely affirmed political-moral ideals of our time, democracy and human rights, yields a third great political-moral ideal: liberal democracy, or, as Aidan O’Neill has termed it, post-Nuremberg democracy.⁵

To say that a democracy is committed to the proposition that every human being has inherent dignity and is inviolable is to say that in the political culture of the democracy, the proposition is axiomatic. To say that a democracy is committed to human rights against government means that in any democratic legal system, human rights are recognized and protected as fundamental legal rights. Indeed, human rights against government may be recognized and protected in a democratic system as a fundamental legal claim and as a moral claim of a special sort: a moral claim about what government may not do to human beings, or about what government must do for human beings, given that every human being has inherent dignity and is inviolable.

In this essay I focus on the proposition to which liberal democracy is committed: that every human being has inherent dignity and is inviolable. I call this proposition “the morality of human rights.”

2. THE MORALITY OF HUMAN RIGHTS

By “the morality of human rights,” I mean the morality that, according to the International Bill of Human Rights, is the principal ground—the principal warrant—for human rights legislation. The morality of human rights is not the only basis for the law of human rights, but according to

Richard A. Posner, “Enlightened Despot,” *New Republic*, April 23, 2007, pp. 53, 54, for a definition of “political democracy in the modern sense,” which highlights frequent election of government officials and their accountability to the citizenry.

⁴ While the conception presented here is not the only way to conceive of what makes a liberal democracy, it is both common and, for many, the most morally attractive. See Thomas Nagel, “Progressive But Not Liberal,” *New York Review of Books*, May 25, 2006; Charles Larmore, “The Moral Basis of Political Liberalism,” *Journal of Philosophy* 96 (1999), pp. 599, 624–625; Jeffrey Stout, “A House Founded on the Sea: Is Democracy a Dictatorship of Relativism?” *Common Knowledge* 13 (2008), pp. 385, 387. Stout quotes Pope John Paul II, “The Gospel of Life,” *Evangelium Vitae* 33 (1995). Cf. Samuel Brittan, “Making Common Cause: How Liberals Differ, and What They Ought to Agree On,” *Times Literary Supplement*, September 20, 1996, pp. 3–4. See also Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (New York: Penguin, 1992), p. 126.

⁵ See Aidan O’Neill, “Roman Catholicism and the Temptation of Shari’a,” *Common Knowledge* 15 (2009), pp. 269, 297ff.

the International Bill of Human Rights, it is the principal ground, as I will elaborate below.

The International Bill of Human Rights⁶ consists of three documents: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights.⁷ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights refers in its preamble to “the inherent dignity... of all members of the human family,” stating in Article 1 that “all members of the human family are born free and equal in dignity and rights... and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” The two international covenants each refer, in their preambles, to “the inherent dignity... of all members of the human family” and to “the inherent dignity of the human person,” from which, the covenants insist, “the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family... derive.”

According to the International Bill of Human Rights, then—and also according to the constitutions of many liberal democracies⁸—the morality of human rights consists of two connected claims, the first of which is this: each and every [born] human being has equal inherent dignity.⁹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “dignity” principally as “the quality

⁶ See the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Fact Sheet No. 2 (Rev. 1): The International Bill of Human Rights, <http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu6/2/fs2.htm>.

⁷ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted and announced to the public by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 10, 1948. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which are treaties and as such are binding on the several states that are signatories, were meant in part to elaborate on the various rights specified in the Universal Declaration. The ICCPR and the ICESCR were each adopted and opened for signature, ratification, and accession by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 16, 1966. The ICESCR entered into force on January 3, 1976, and as of January 2007 had 155 state parties. The ICCPR entered into force on March 23, 1976, and as of January 2007 had 160 state parties. The United States is a party to the ICCPR but not to the ICESCR. In October 1977, President Jimmy Carter signed both the ICCPR and the ICESCR. Although the United States Senate has not ratified the ICESCR, in September 1992, with the support of President George H.W. Bush, the Senate ratified the ICCPR (subject to certain “reservations, understandings and declarations”; see *Cong. Rec.* (April 2, 1992), 138, parts 4781–4784.

⁸ See David Kretzmer and Eckart Klein, eds., *The Concept of Human Dignity in Human Rights Discourse* (The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 2002), pp. v–vi, 41–42; Vicki C. Jackson, “Constitutional Dialogue and Human Dignity: States and Transnational Constitutional Discourse,” *Montana Law Review* 65 (2004), p. 15; Mirko Bagaric and James Allan, “The Vacuous Concept of Dignity,” *Journal of Human Rights* 5:2 (2006), pp. 257, 261–263.

⁹ As a descriptive matter, the morality of human rights holds not that every human being has inherent dignity, but only that every *born* human being has inherent dignity. See Michael J. Perry, *Toward a Theory of Human Rights: Religion, Law, Courts* (New

of being worthy or honorable; worthiness, worth, nobleness, excellence.”¹⁰ To say, then, that every human being has inherent dignity is to say that the fundamental dignity every human being possesses is the result of neither his being a member of a particular group (racial, ethnic, national, religious, etc.), nor his being a man or a woman, nor his having achieved something, but simply his existence as a human being.¹¹ Furthermore, being “inherently dignified” is not a condition that admits of degrees. Just as no pregnant woman can be more—or less—pregnant than another pregnant woman, no human being can have more—or less—inherent dignity than another human being. According to the morality of human rights, “all members of the human family are born... equal in dignity...” Hereafter, when I employ the phrase “inherent dignity,” I mean “equal inherent dignity.”¹²

The second claim of the morality of human rights is that the inherent dignity of human beings has a normative force for us, and, as such, every one of us should live our lives in accord with the fact that every human being has inherent dignity. We should respect—and indeed, we have conclusive reason to respect—the inherent dignity of every human being. There is another way to state the second claim: every human being is “inviolable,” not to be violated.¹³ According to the morality of human rights, one can violate a human being either explicitly or implicitly. One violates a human being explicitly if one explicitly denies that she (or he) has inherent dignity. The Nazis, for example, explicitly denied the Jews’

York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 54. Except when discussing abortion, I generally bracket the born/unborn distinction.

¹⁰ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (1991), s.v. “dignity.”

¹¹ See Peter Berger, “On the Obsolescence of the Concept of Honor,” in Stanley Hauerwas and Alasdair MacIntyre, eds., *Revisions: Changing Perspectives in Moral Philosophy* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 172, 176; Charles E. Curran, *Catholic Social Teaching 1891–Present: A Historical, Theological, and Ethical Analysis* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), p. 132. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 26, expresses this idea when it bans “discrimination on any ground such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.”

¹² For a discussion of the concept of human dignity, and the role the concept has played in various contexts (Western thought, legal and judicial discourse, and transnational judicial conversations), see Christopher McCrudden, “Human Dignity” (2006), <http://ssrn.com/abstract=899687>. See also Doron Shultziner, “Human Dignity: Functions and Meanings,” *Global Jurist Topics* 3:3 (2003), <http://www.bepress.com/gj/topics/vol3/iss3/art3>. For a skeptical account of the human dignity discourse, see Bagaric and Allan, “Vacuous Concept of Dignity,” pp. 257–270, esp. p. 269: “Dignity is a vacuous concept.”

¹³ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “inviolable” as “not to be violated; not liable or allowed to suffer violence; to be kept sacredly free from profanation, infraction, or assault.”

inherent dignity.¹⁴ One violates a human being implicitly if one treats her as if she lacks inherent dignity, either by doing to her what one would not do to her, or by refusing to do for her what one would not refuse to do for her, if one genuinely perceived her to have inherent dignity. Continuing our example: even if the Nazis had not explicitly denied the Jews' inherent dignity, they would have implicitly denied it. The Nazis did to the Jews what no one who genuinely perceived the Jews to have inherent dignity would have done. In the context of the morality of human rights, to say that (1) every human being has inherent dignity and we should live our lives in a way that respects that dignity is to say that (2) every human being has inherent dignity and is inviolable in the sense just indicated. To affirm the morality of human rights is to affirm that every human being has inherent dignity and is inviolable.

3. A RELIGIOUS BASIS

Some mistakenly believe that persons of deep religious faith cannot truly embrace liberal democracy. The principal concern here is with the liberal democracy of the United States. Most citizens of the United States are religious believers,¹⁵ and for most of them, their religious faith gives them powerful reasons to embrace liberal democracy. In fact, it is a part of the content of the religious faith of most citizens of the United States that every human being has inherent dignity and is inviolable, a proposition to which I have claimed liberal democracy is intrinsically committed.

But the fact that religious faith enhances the commitment of Americans to liberal democracy runs deeper than this. This is because the morality of human rights is as close to a global morality as human beings have ever achieved (or probably will ever achieve), and, related to this, the language of human rights has become the moral lingua franca.¹⁶

¹⁴ See Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Ipperman, *The Racial State: Germany, 1933–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Johannes Morsink, "World War Two and the Universal Declaration," *Human Rights Quarterly* 15 (1993), pp. 357, 363; Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

¹⁵ The United States is one of the world's most religious liberal democracies. See Jeffrey L. Sheler, "Faith in America," *U.S. News*, May 6, 2002, pp. 40, 42. Although predominantly Christian, the United States has become one of the most religiously diverse countries in the world. See Diana Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2002). See also Sheler, "Faith in America," p. 42; survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2008), <http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/affiliations-all-traditions.pdf>.

¹⁶ See Jürgen Habermas, *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 153–154.

And yet, despite the extent of this universality, the fundamental question remains: is the morality of human rights true?

Recall that the morality of human rights consists of two connected claims: that every human being has (equal) inherent dignity, and that every human being is inviolable. That is, the inherent dignity that every human being possesses has a normative force for us, and every one of us should live our lives in accord with the fact that every human being has inherent dignity; we should respect—we have conclusive reason to respect—the inherent dignity of every human being. And so, if these claims are true, why are they true? That the International Bill of Human Rights is famously silent on that question is not surprising, given the plurality of religious and nonreligious views that existed among those who bequeathed us the Universal Declaration and the two covenants.¹⁷

Below I articulate a religious response to the question of why these claims are true. For purposes of exposition, I attribute this religious response to an imaginary “Sarah,” who is a religious believer. No one who is not a religious believer is expected to accept Sarah’s response (or any other religious response); indeed, even some who are religious believers would not accept it. Nonetheless, Sarah’s response is an intelligible, coherent reply to the question and provides a conclusive reason for many religious believers to live the kind of life the morality of human rights claims they, and we, should live.

Although she is a Christian, Sarah is sufficiently familiar with Judaism and Islam to know that her religious response is one affirmed by not only many Christians but also many religious Jews and Muslims.¹⁸ So,

The morality of human rights, while the lingua franca of today’s world, is not at all a new morality but an ancient one. On this, see Leszek Kolakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 214.

¹⁷ See Jacques Maritain, “Introduction,” in UNESCO, *Human Rights: Comments and Interpretation* (London: Allan Wingate, 1949), pp. 9–17. Maritain wrote: “we agree about the rights but on condition that no one asks us why” (p. 9). However, he was wrong. There was agreement not only about “the rights” but also about a part of the “why”; namely, that every human being has inherent dignity. Considering that the declaration explicitly refers in its preamble to “the inherent dignity... of all members of the human family,” and states in Article 1 that “all members of the human family are born free and equal in dignity and rights,” it would be more correct to state that we agree both about the rights and about every human being having inherent dignity—but on condition that no one asks us why every human being has inherent dignity.

¹⁸ On Islam and the morality of human rights, see Recep Senturk, “‘I Am, Therefore I Have Rights’: Human Rights and Islam Between Universalistic and Communalistic Perspectives,” *Muslim World Journal of Human Rights* 2:1 (2005), <http://www.bepress.com/mwjhr/vol2/iss1/art11>. See also Khaled Abou El Fadl, “Islam and the Challenge of Democratic Commitment,” in Elizabeth M. Bucar and Barbra Barnett, eds., *Does Human Rights Need God?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005), p. 58. On Judaism and the morality of human rights, see Asher Maoz, “Can Judaism Serve as a

notwithstanding her Christian vocabulary and scriptural references, Sarah's religious response is ecumenical as among the three great monotheistic faiths.¹⁹

Sarah affirms that every human being has inherent dignity and that we should live our lives accordingly. For a reason that will soon be apparent, Sarah prefers to say that every human being "is sacred." Nonetheless, for Sarah, "has inherent dignity" and "is sacred" are fully equivalent to each other. In affirming that every human being has inherent dignity, Sarah affirms the morality of human rights. In response to the question her affirmation provokes, why or by virtue of what does every human being have inherent dignity? Sarah gives a religious explanation: speaking the words of the First Letter of John, Sarah says that "God is love"²⁰ and "whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him."²¹ Moreover, God's act of creating and sustaining the universe is an act of love,²² and we human beings are the beloved children of God and sisters and brothers to one another.²³ Every human being has inherent dignity, says Sarah, in the sense that every human being is a beloved child of God and a

Source of Human Rights?" *Heidelberg Journal of International Law* 64 (2004), p. 677; Michael Lerner, "Jesus the Jew," *Tikkun* (2004), p. 33. See also Robert Traer, *Faith in Human Rights: Support in Religious Traditions for a Global Struggle* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1991).

¹⁹ If we listen carefully to what Sarah is about to say—and if we refrain from imputing to Sarah standard Christian positions on theological issues she does not address, such as the divinity of Jesus—we will not assume that she identifies herself as a Christian in the conventional sense (though, for all we know, she may).

²⁰ I John 4:8 reads: "whoever fails to love does not know God, because God is love." The translations of biblical passages here and elsewhere in this essay are those of *The New Jerusalem Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1985).

²¹ I John 4:16. See John D. Caputo, "The Experience of God and the Axiology of the Impossible," in Mark A. Wrathall, ed., *Religion After Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 138.

²² Simone Weil wrote: "God created through love and for love. God did not create anything except love itself, and the means to love." Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 1951), p. 123. Note that Sarah doesn't put much weight on the distinction between God's "creating" and God's "sustaining" the universe. See Brian Davies, "Creationism and All That," *The Tablet* (London), May 11, 2002, p. 16.

²³ Cf. Kristin Renwick Monroe, *The Heart of Altruism: Perceptions of a Common Humanity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 216. As Hilary Putnam has noted, the moral image central to what he calls the Jerusalem-based religions is "equality and also fraternity, as in the metaphor of the whole human race as one Family, of all women and men as sisters and brothers." Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1987), pp. 60–61. In an essay on "The Spirituality of the Talmud," Ben Zion Bokser and Baruch M. Bokser state: "from this conception of man's place in the universe comes the sense of the supreme sanctity of all human life. 'He who destroys one person has dealt a blow at the entire universe, and he who sustains or saves one person has sustained the whole world.'" Bokser and Bokser, "Introduction: The Spirituality of

sister/brother to every other human being.²⁴ Sarah is fully aware that she is speaking analogically, but that's the best anyone can do, she insists, in speaking about who God is²⁵—as in “Gracious God, gentle in your power and strong in your tenderness, you have brought us forth from the womb of your being and breathed into us the breath of life.”²⁶

Sarah's explanation provokes yet a further question about the ground of the normativity—of the “should”—in the claim that we should live our lives in a way that respects the inherent dignity of every human being: “I'll assume, for the sake of our discussion, that every human being has inherent dignity in the sense that every human being is a beloved child of God and a sister/brother to every other human being. So what? Why should it matter to me—to the way I live my life—that every human being has inherent dignity, that every human being is a beloved child of God and a sister/brother to me? Why should I respect—why should I want to be a person who respects—the inherent dignity of every human being?” In responding to this important question about the ground of normativity, Sarah—who “understands the authority of moral claims to be warranted not by divine dictates but by their contribution to human flourishing”²⁷—states her belief that the God who loves us has created us to love one another. (We are created not only to achieve union, in love, with one another; we are also created, Sarah believes, to achieve union,

the Talmud,” in *The Talmud: Selected Writings* 7 (1989). They go on to assert the equality of inherent dignity (pp. 30–31).

²⁴ Cf. Daniel C. Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), p. 474, quoting Lee Khan Yew, senior minister of Singapore, on the outcry over the sentence of flogging given to Michael Fay for vandalism: “to us in Asia, an individual is an ant. To you, he's a child of God. It is an amazing concept.”

²⁵ See Richard P. McBrien, ed., *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism* (San Francisco: Harper, 1995), p. 43, s.v. “analogy”: “a comparison in the form of ‘A is to B as C is to D’; e.g., ‘God is to the world as the artist is to her work.’” All theological language is analogous (with the exception, perhaps, of negative language, e.g., God is not finite), since we can compare God only to the created things we know; we cannot speak of God except in human terms. Sarah's statement that every human being is created “in the image of God” is analogical. According to Genesis 1:26, humanity was created in God's image, according to his likeness. Found sparsely in the Hebrew Scriptures, the word “image” was often used in Pauline writings to interpret Christ's work and became central to early Christian reflections on the human condition, the meaning of redemption in Christ, and hope for humankind. For a discussion of different understandings and uses of “image of God” language, see Roger Ruston, *Human Rights and the Image of God* (London: SCM Press, 2004), pp. 269–291.

²⁶ *United Church of Christ: Book of Worship* (United Church of Christ, 1983), p. 111.

²⁷ See Jean Porter, *Nature as Reason: A Thomistic Theory of the Natural Law* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005), pp. 144–145; Stephen Pope, “The Evolutionary Roots of Morality in Theological Perspective,” *Zygon* 33 (1998), pp. 545, 554.

in love, with God. Sarah understands that state to be “not an ontological unity such that either the lover or the beloved ceases to have his own individual existence [but rather,] a unity at the level of affection or will by which one person affectively takes the Other to be part of himself and the goods of the Other to be his own goods.”²⁸ Given our created nature—given what we have been created for—the most fitting way of life for us human beings, the most deeply satisfying way of life of which we are capable, as children of God and sisters and brothers to one another, is one in which we embrace Jesus’ “new” commandment, reported in John 13:34, to “love one another... just as I have loved you.”²⁹ By becoming persons of a certain sort—persons who discern one another as bearers of inherent dignity and love one another as such—we fulfill our created nature.³⁰ “We are well aware that we have passed over from death to life because we love our brothers. Whoever does not love remains in death.”³¹

Indeed, Sarah believes that in some situations, we love most truly and fully—and therefore we live most truly and fully—by taking the path that will probably or even certainly lead to our dying. “No one can have greater love than to lay down his life for his friends.”³² It is worth noting that for Sarah, the ultimate fulfillment of our created nature—which, she believes, is mystical union, in love, with God and with one another³³—can

²⁸ David M. Gallagher, “Thomas Aquinas on Self-Love as the Basis for Love of Others,” *Acta Philosophica* 8 (1999), p. 23 (emphasis in original).

²⁹ For Christians, the basic shape of the good life is indicated by Jesus’ instruction at a Passover Seder on the eve of his execution: “I give you a new commandment: love one another; you must love one another just as I have loved you” (John 13:34). See also John 15:12, 17.

³⁰ On the life worth living for Aristotle as well as for Judaism and Christianity, see David Lodge, “Goodbye to All That,” *New York Review of Books*, May 27, 2004, pp. 39, 41, quoting Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (London: Basic Books, 2003).

³¹ I John 3:14. In the Gospel, there are two great commandments, not one. One is to love God, the other to love your neighbor as yourself. Matthew 22:34–40; Mark 12:28–34; Luke 10:25–28. Cf. J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 243. On the relationship between the two commandments, see Karl Rahner, “Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbor and the Love of God,” *Theological Investigations* 6 (1969), pp. 231–232, 236–239, 247.

³² John 15:13. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that “when Christ calls us, his call leads to death.” Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R.H. Fuller (New York: Touchstone, 1995 [1937]), p. 41. Cf. Helmut Gollwitzer et al., *Dying We Live: The Final Messages and Records of the Resistance* (New York: Pantheon, 1956); Terry Eagleton, “Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching,” review of *The God Delusion*, by Richard Dawkins, *London Review of Books*, October 19, 2006.

³³ Cf. Charles Taliaferro, “Why We Need Immortality,” *Modern Theology* 6 (1990), p. 367.

be neither fully achieved nor even fully understood in our earthly life.³⁴ She would quote I Corinthians 13:12: “now we see only reflections in a mirror, mere riddles, but then we shall be seeing face to face. Now, I can know only imperfectly; but then I shall know just as fully as I am myself known.” That said, Sarah believes that in our earthly life we can make an important beginning.

The “love” in Jesus’ counsel to “love one another” is not *eros* or *philia*, but *agape*.³⁵ To love another in the sense of *agape* is to see her (or him) in a certain way (namely, as child of God and sister/brother to oneself) and, therefore, to act toward her in a certain way.³⁶ *Agape* “discloses to us the full humanity of others. To become properly aware of that full humanity is to become incapable of treating it with contempt, cruelty, or indifference. The full awareness of others’ humanity that love involves is an essentially motivating perception.”³⁷

The “one another” in Jesus’ counsel is radically inclusive: “you have heard how it was said, You will love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say this to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he causes

³⁴ See Byron L. Sherwin, “Jews and the World to Come,” *First Things*, June/July 2006, p. 13. Cf. Graham Greene, *Monsignor Quixote* (New York: Penguin, 2008), p. 221.

³⁵ The literature in Christian ethics on *agape* is voluminous. Some recent titles: Colin Grant, *Altruism and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Garth L. Hallett, *Christian Neighbor-Love: An Assessment of Six Rival Versions* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1989); Stephen J. Pope, *The Evolution of Altruism and the Ordering of Love* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1995); Edmund N. Santurri and William Werpehowski, eds., *The Love Commandments: Essays in Christian Ethics and Moral Philosophy* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1992); Edward Collins Vacek, S.J., *Love, Human and Divine: The Heart of Christian Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1994); Timothy P. Jackson, *Love Disconsolated: Meditations on Christian Charity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); André Comte-Sponville, *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues: The Uses of Philosophy in Everyday Life*, trans. Catherine Temerson (New York: Holt, 2002 [1996]), pp. 222–290; Timothy P. Jackson, *The Priority of Love: Christian Charity and Social Justice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

³⁶ For Sarah, to love another, in the sense of *agape*, is not to feel a certain way but to act a certain way. Cf. Jeffrie G. Murphy, “Law Like Love,” *Syracuse Law Review* 55 (2004), pp. 15, 21.

³⁷ Timothy Chappell, review of *A Common Humanity: Thinking About Love and Truth and Justice*, by Raimond Gaita, *Mind* 111 (2002), pp. 411, 412. Chappell here describes “Gaita’s view” as “reminiscent of course of Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch.” Cf. Alain Finkielkraut, *In the Name of Humanity: Reflections on the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), pp. 5–6. Commenting on Primo Levi’s encounter at Auschwitz with the German chemist Doktor Engineer Pannwitz, Finkielkraut writes: “to Doktor Pannwitz, the prisoner standing there [Levi], before the desk of his examiner, is not a frightened and miserable man. He is not a dangerous or inferior or loathsome man either, condemned to prison, torture, punishment, or death. He is, quite simply, not a man at all.”

his sun to rise on the bad as well as the good, and sends down rain to fall on the upright and the wicked alike.... You must therefore set no bounds to your love, just as your heavenly Father sets none to his.”³⁸

As it happens, Sarah embodies Jesus’ extravagant counsel to “love one another just as I have loved you.” She loves all human beings. Sarah loves even “the Other”: she loves not only those for whom she has personal affection, or those with whom she works or has other dealings, or those among whom she lives; she loves even those who are most remote, who are unfamiliar, strange, alien, those who, because they are so distant or weak or both, will never play any concrete role, for good or ill, in Sarah’s life.³⁹ Sarah loves even those from whom she is most estranged and toward whom she feels most antagonistic: those whose ideologies and projects and acts she judges to be not merely morally objectionable, but morally abominable.⁴⁰ Sarah loves even her enemies; indeed, Sarah loves even those who have violated her, who have failed to respect her inherent dignity. Sarah is fond of quoting Graham Greene to her incredulous friends: “when you visualized a man or a woman carefully, you could always begin to feel pity.... When you saw the corners of the eyes, the shape of the mouth, how the hair grew, it was impossible to hate. Hate was just a failure of imagination.”⁴¹

Such love, such a state of being, such an orientation in the world is obviously an ideal. Moreover, for most human beings, it is an extremely

³⁸ Matthew 5:43–48. See also Luke 6:27–35. Recall here the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:29–37. In *The New Jerusalem Bible*, a note on “Samaritan” explains that “the contrast is between the element in Israel most strictly bound to the law of love, and the heretic and stranger... from whom normally only hate could be expected.”

³⁹ See Norman Geras, *The Contract of Mutual Indifference: Political Philosophy After the Holocaust* (London: Verso, 1999), p. 67: “the claims of the intimate circle are real and important enough. Yet the movement from intimacy, and to faces we do not know, still carries the ring of a certain local confinement. For there are the people as well whose faces we never encounter, but whom we have ample means of knowing about... their claims too, in trouble, unheeded, are a cause for shame.”

⁴⁰ See Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. xviii–xix.

⁴¹ Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory* (New York: Penguin, 1940), p. 131. See also Denise Levertov, *The Poet in the World* (New York: Norton, 1974). For a dissenting view of hate, see Meir Y. Soloveichik, “The Virtue of Hate,” *First Things*, February 2003, p. 41. As the *Chronicle of Higher Education* stated in an e-mail notice on this article dated February 13, 2003: “Rabbi Soloveichik asks: ‘Is an utterly evil man... deserving of a theist’s love?’ and... concludes that there is ‘no minimizing the difference between Judaism and Christianity on whether hate can be virtuous.’ He examines the ‘theological underpinnings’ for each faith’s approach to hate and notes that ‘the crucifixion is a story of a loving God seeking humanity’s salvation,’ but that ‘not a single Jewish source asserts that God deeply desires to save all humanity.’” For vigorous criticism, by religious Jews and others, of Soloveichik’s essay, and a response by Soloveichik, see “Correspondence: Jews and Christians, Hate and Forgiveness,” *First Things*, May 2003, pp. 2–9.

demanding ideal; for many persons, it is also an implausible ideal.⁴² Why should anyone embrace the ideal? Why should anyone want to be (or to become) such a person—a person who, like Sarah, loves even the Other? This is, existentially if not intellectually, the fundamental moral question for anyone: why should I want to be the kind of person who makes the choices, who does the things I am being told I should make/do? And, in fact, Sarah's interlocutor presses her with this question: "Why should I want to be the kind of person who, like you, loves the Other? What reason do I have to do that?" Because that is essentially the question about the ground of the normativeness in the claim that we should live our lives in a way that respects the inherent dignity of every human being, Sarah is puzzled. She thought she had already answered the question. Sarah patiently rehearses her answer, an answer that appeals ultimately to one's commitment to one's own authentic well-being: "the most deeply satisfying way of life of which we are capable is one in which we 'love one another just as I have loved you.' By becoming persons who love one another, we fulfill—we perfect—our created nature and thereby achieve our truest, deepest, most enduring happiness."⁴³ It is now Sarah's turn to ask a question of her interlocutor: "what further reason could you possibly want for becoming (or remaining) the kind of person who loves the Other?"

When he was deliberating about how to live, St. Augustine asked, "What does anything matter if it does not have to do with happiness?" His question requires explanation, because he is not advising selfishness or the reduction of other people to utilities, and even qualification, because other things can have some weight. All the same, the answer he expects is obviously right: only a happy life matters conclusively. If I had a clear view of it, I could have no motive to decline it, I could regret nothing by accepting it, I would have nothing about which to deliberate further.⁴⁴

⁴² It seems to have been an implausible ideal for Ivan Karamazov. See Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, opening of ch. 5, IV (New York: Norton, 1976).

⁴³ Thus, Sarah rejects as false Vacek's distinction between "natural-law ethics" and "mutual-love ethics." See Edward Collins Vacek, S.J., "Divine-Command, Natural-Law, and Mutual-Love Ethics," *Theological Studies* 57 (1996), p. 633. For Sarah, what fulfills human nature is to live in a relationship of love with God and with other human beings. Vacek's "mutual-love ethics" seems to me better understood not as an alternative to "natural-law ethics" but as a version thereof. For an excellent explication of Aquinas' understanding of the relation between self-love and other-love (and also between self-love and love of God), see Gallagher, "Aquinas on Self-Love," p. 23; see also Porter, *Nature as Reason*, pp. 209–210.

⁴⁴ Stephen Scott, "Motive and Justification," *Journal of Philosophy* 85 (1988), pp. 479, 499. On the term "happiness," see Julia Annas, "Virtue and Eudaimonism," *Social*

A clarification may be helpful here. Does Sarah do what she does for the Other—for example, does she contribute to “Bread for the World” as a way of feeding the hungry—for a self-regarding reason? Does she do so, say, because it makes her happy to do so? No. Although feeding the hungry does make Sarah happy, that isn’t why she does it. Given the kind of person she is, the reason—the Other-regarding reason—Sarah feeds the hungry is this: “the hungry are my sisters and brothers; I love them.” Now, a different question: why is Sarah committed to being the kind of person she is, and why does she believe everyone should want to be such a person? *Pace* Augustine, Sarah’s answer to that question is self-regarding: “as persons who love one another, we fulfill our created nature and thereby achieve our truest, deepest, most enduring happiness.”⁴⁵ According to Sarah, it is not individual acts of love that necessarily make one happy; it is, rather, becoming a person who loves the Other “just as I have loved you.” “Self-fulfillment happens when we are engaged from beyond ourselves. Self-fulfillment ultimately depends on self-transcendence. This is essentially the claim that is made by religion, that the meaning of our lives is to be found beyond ourselves.”⁴⁶

It bears emphasis that Sarah does not believe she should be the kind of person she is because God has issued a command to her to be that kind of person—a command that, because God is entitled to rule, to legislate, she is obligated to obey. For Sarah, God is not best understood in such terms. A theistic religious vision does not necessarily include (though some conventional theistic religious visions do) a conception of God as supreme legislator, issuing directives for human conduct.⁴⁷ For Sarah, for whom God is love, not supreme legislator, some choices are good for us to make (or not to make), and, therefore, we ought (or ought not) to

Philosophy & Policy 15 (1998), pp. 37, 53 n. 35. Cf. Richard Taylor, “Ancient Wisdom and Modern Folly,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13 (1988), pp. 54, 57, 58.

⁴⁵ Sarah’s eudaimonistic, love-animated morality will not sit well with those influenced by Kant. For an insightful, clarifying discussion of how sharply Kant’s understanding of happiness differs from Aristotle’s, see James Bernard Murphy, “Practical Reason and Moral Psychology in Aristotle and Kant,” *Social Philosophy & Policy* 18 (2001), pp. 257, 273–276.

⁴⁶ Grant, *Altruism and Christian Ethics*, p. xix. Sarah agrees with Grant. She understands Aquinas to have substantially defended the same position. Cf. David O. Brink, “A Puzzle About the Rational Authority of Morality,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 6 (1992), pp. 1, 18–22. See also Brink, “Self-Love and Altruism,” *Social Philosophy & Policy* 14 (1997), p. 122. Augustine, Aquinas, and Sarah are all what Brink calls “metaphysical egoists.” So too, apparently, are some “neo-Confucian” thinkers. See Yong Huang, “Why Be Moral? The Cheng Brothers’ Neo-Confucian Answer,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 36 (2008), p. 321.

⁴⁷ Indeed, for some religious believers, such a “God” is an idol. Cf. Charles Larmore, “Beyond Religion and Enlightenment,” *San Diego Law Review* 36 (1993), pp. 799–802.

make them, not because God commands (or forbids) them, but because God is who God is, because the universe—the universe created and sustained by God, who is love, in an act that is an expression of God/love—is what it is, and, in particular, because we human beings are who we are. For Sarah, “the Law of God is not what God legislates but what God is, just as the Law of Gravity is not what gravity legislates but what gravity is.”⁴⁸ Sarah believes that because God is who God is, because the universe is what it is, and because we are who we are, and not because of anything commanded by God as supreme legislator, the most fitting way of life for us human beings—the most deeply satisfying way of life of which we are capable—is one in which we children of God, we sisters and brothers, “love one another just as I have loved you.”

Sarah’s religious worldview reminds us that in the real world, if not in every academic moralist’s study, fundamental moral questions are intimately related to religious (or metaphysical) questions; there is no way to address fundamental moral questions without also addressing, if only implicitly, religious ones.⁴⁹ (That is not to say that one must give a religious answer to a religious question. Take the question “Does God exist?” Obviously, many people do not give religious answers to this question.)⁵⁰

⁴⁸ John Dominic Crossan, “Case Against Manifesto,” *Law, Text, Culture* 5 (2000), pp. 129, 144. For a version of Divine Command Theory—albeit an unconventional version—that has a strong affinity with Sarah’s moral “theory,” see Martin Kavka and Randi Rashkover, “A Jewish Modified Divine Command Theory,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 32 (2004), p. 387. In discussion, Recep Senturk said that he saw no conflict between a loving God and a legislating God. The Holy Scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Senturk said, always portray God as both loving and legislating. I don’t mean to suggest a conflict. For Sarah, nonetheless, “the Law of God is not what God legislates but what God is, just as the Law of Gravity is not what gravity legislates but what gravity is.” Cf. Kavka and Rashkover, “Jewish Modified Divine Command Theory”: “we think that there is no philosophical ground for understanding ‘obedience to God’ in the sense [of] ‘obedience to propositional sentences uttered by God’” (p. 387).

⁴⁹ See Peter Geach, *God and the Soul* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), pp. 127–128.

⁵⁰ Jürgen Habermas has acknowledged “that a philosophy that thinks postmetaphysically cannot answer the question that [David] Tracy... calls attention to: why be moral at all?” Habermas, *Religion and Rationality*, p. 81. What Habermas then says is really quite remarkable: “We acquire our moral intuitions in our parents’ home, not in school. And moral insights tell us that we do not have any good reasons for behaving otherwise: for this, no self-surpassing of morality is necessary. It is true that we often behave otherwise, but we do so with a bad conscience. The first half of the sentence attests to the weakness of the motivational power of good reasons; the second half attests that rational motivation by reasons is more than nothing [*auch nicht Nichts ist*]—moral convictions do not allow themselves to be overridden without resistance.” Putting aside our acquisition of moral “intuitions” in many places besides (or in addition to) our parents’ home, the more important point that needs to be made contra Habermas is that we don’t all acquire the same moral intuitions: Some of us acquire moral intuitions that enable us to ignore and perhaps even brutalize others without pangs of conscience.

In the real world, one's response to fundamental moral questions has long been intimately bound up with one's answers to certain other fundamental questions: Who are we? Where did we come from; what is our origin, our beginning? Where are we going; what is our destiny, our end?⁵¹ What is the meaning of suffering, of evil, of death? And there is the cardinal question, the question that comprises many of the others: is human life ultimately meaningful or, instead, ultimately bereft of meaning, absurd?⁵² If any questions are fundamental, these questions—"religious or limit questions"⁵³—are fundamental. Such questions—"naïve" questions, "questions with no answers," "barriers that cannot be breached"⁵⁴—are "the most serious and difficult... that any human being or society must face...."⁵⁵ John Paul II was surely right in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio*

It is incredible that in the waning days of this unbearably brutal century, Habermas—writing in Germany of all places—could suggest otherwise. We need not even look at the oppressors themselves; we need look only at those whose passivity makes them complicit. The real world is full of what Primo Levi called "us-ism". On this see Nathan Stoltzfus, "Dissent in Nazi Germany," *Atlantic*, September 1992, pp. 87, 94: "those on the Rosenstrasse who risked their lives for Jews did not express opposition to anti-Semitic policies per se. They displayed primarily what the late Primo Levi, a survivor of Auschwitz, called 'selfishness extended to the person closest to you... us-ism.'"

⁵¹ Abraham J. Heschel, *Who Is Man?* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965), p. 28, gives equivalent questions from the rabbinic tradition: "Whence did you come? 'Whither are you going?' 'Before whom are you destined to give account?'" For "Where Do We Come From?" "What Are We?" "Where Are We Going?" presented as the eternal questions children ask more intensely, unremittingly, and subtly than we sometimes imagine, see Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1990), p. 37.

⁵² Denise Lardner Carmody and John Tully Carmody, *Western Ways to the Center: An Introduction to Religions of the West* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1983), pp. 198–199. See also Abraham Heschel's two-part essay "Faith," first published in *The Reconstructionist* 10, November 3 and 17, 1944. For a later statement on faith incorporating some of the original essay, see Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976 [1951]), pp. 159–176.

⁵³ David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 86.

⁵⁴ In Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (London: Faber & Faber, 2004 [1984]), p. 139, the narrator, referring to "the questions that had been going through Tereza's head since she was a child," says that "the only truly serious questions are ones that even a child can formulate. Only the most naïve of questions are truly serious. They are the questions with no answers. A question with no answer is a barrier that cannot be breached. In other words, it is questions with no answers that set the limits of human possibilities, describe the boundaries of human existence."

⁵⁵ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p. 4. Tracy adds: "to formulate such questions honestly and well, to respond to them with passion and rigor, is the work of all theology.... Religions ask and respond to such fundamental questions.... Theologians, by definition, risk an intellectual life on the wager that religious traditions can be studied as authentic responses to just such questions."

that such questions “have their common source in the quest for meaning which has always compelled the human heart” and that “the answer given to these questions decides the direction which people seek to give to their lives.”⁵⁶

4. A CONCLUDING THOUGHT

We can now see why it is that for most citizens of the United States, their religious faith gives them a powerful reason to hold liberal democracy within their embrace.

Indeed, we may fairly wonder what reason those who lack religious faith have for embracing liberal democracy’s constitutive commitment to the inherent dignity and inviolability of every human being. Listen, in that regard, to Jürgen Habermas, who is not a religious believer:

Christianity has functioned for the normative self-understanding of modernity as more than a mere precursor or a catalyst. Equalitarian universalism, from which sprang the ideas of freedom and social solidarity, of an autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, of the individual morality of conscience, human rights, and democracy, is the direct heir to the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of continual critical appropriation and reinterpretation. To this day, there is no alternative to it. And in light of the current challenges of the postnational constellation, we continue to draw on the substance of this heritage. Everything else is just idle post-modern talk.⁵⁷

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⁵⁶ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio: On the Relation Between Faith and Reason* (1998), issued September 14, 1998, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_15101998_fides-et-ratio_en.html. In the introduction to *Fides et Ratio*, part 1, John Paul II wrote that “a cursory glance at ancient history shows clearly how in different parts of the world, with their different cultures, there arise at the same time the fundamental questions which pervade human life: Who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going? Why is there evil? What is there after this life?” See also ch. 3, part 26. We find a similar statement in the Second Vatican Council’s declaration in Pope Paul VI, *Nostra Aetate: Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* (1965), http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

⁵⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *Time of Transitions* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), pp. 150–151. See also Habermas, *Religion and Rationality*, p. 162, n. 15: “the basic concepts of philosophical ethics, as they have developed up to this point, also fail to capture all the intuitions that have already found a more nuanced expression in the language of the Bible, and which we have only come to know by means of a halfway religious socialization.”