Chapter 4

RELIGIOUS ETHICS IN A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY

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ONE OF THE OBJECTIONS often raised against religious theories in ethics is that in a religiously pluralistic society they will be divisive, undermining the common, or shared, morality on which a society depends for its health. We would be better served, objectors suggest, by a purely secular ethical theory on which all could agree. The short answer to this objection is that there is a sense in which every society must, and therefore will, have a shared morality, but that a shared ethical theory is not required for such a common morality. And it is good that it is not required, for no comprehensive or foundational ethical theory, not even a secular one, is likely to meet with general agreement in any modern society that permits free inquiry. The development and advocacy of a religious ethical theory, therefore, does not destroy a realistic possibility of agreement that would otherwise exist. I believe this answer to be correct, and I try to develop it more fully in this essay.

Common Morality

Where in the moral life should we look for general agreement? Perhaps first at the beginning of it, in the moral education of children. A university course in moral philosophy may begin with problems of moral skepticism, but if the moral education of children began that way, morality would not exist as a social reality. Children begin early in life (in American culture, at any rate) to acquire the skills of moral *dis*agreement, but they will not have the materials for disagreement unless they first learn some moral facts. They learn that kindness, generosity, and gratitude are good, and that selfishness is bad. They learn that in general it is right for them to obey their parents, wrong to take or break what belongs to someone else, and so forth. Even in learning that certain things do "belong to" certain people, they are learning a partly moral fact that is important to the structure of a society. They do not quite have the concept of morality

until they have learned to distinguish what is morally wrong from what is prohibited merely on account of tastes or preferences of their parents.

It is unlikely that this moral learning will "stick" unless the children find (as they normally do) that a central core of the moral "facts" they learned from their parents are also viewed as facts in the wider community. This common core, I argue, is not an ethical theory; borrowing a phrase from Rawls, we could call it rather an "overlapping consensus."[1] I do not mean to suggest that it exists in the minds of individuals in any sort of isolation from other, less widely shared beliefs. Beliefs belonging to common morality are taught to children in the closest association with more distinctive views and values of their parents, often in the context of a religious institution.

Beginning, as it does, with moral "facts" accepted on authority, moral learning requires little reasoning at first. Moral reasoning is an essential part of the practice of morality, however. Children do in time learn principles that tell us not so much which actions to perform as how to judge which actions we ought to perform. Among these are principles of universalizability ("Do unto others as you would have them do unto you"); fairness (rules should be applied consistently, and on the basis of the facts); and beneficence (it is good to do what is good for people, and bad to do what is bad for people). These principles enjoy general, even cross-cultural, acceptance. It seems likely that we have a natural affinity for them.

That we agree, broadly and roughly, on principles of this sort is important for one of the functions of morality, which is to provide a framework for trying to resolve by discussion practical issues in our common life. We give each other reasons to whose relevance and importance we have a shared commitment. In this way, for example, members of a philosophy department (who perhaps hold quite diverse views in ethical theory) may be able to reach agreement about the appropriate treatment of a particular student's academic situation, based on accepted principles of fairness and consistency in the application of rules, as well as a measure of agreement on the aims and standards of the academic program.

One of the most obvious expressions of a common morality is the criminal law. Defining a type of action as criminal normally expresses moral disapproval of it. And more than disapproval is involved; crimes are acts that society refuses to tolerate. To be effective, except in an oppressive police state, this intolerance requires a broad base of public support. In many jurisdictions of our own society, to be sure, the criminal law forbids some types of action (such as sodomy between consenting adults, or personal use of marijuana) that a substantial segment of the population does not regard as wrong. If enforced, however, such prohibitions are inevitably a source of conflict. A society in which most actions forbidden under

the criminal law were not generally agreed to be morally wrong would be in deep trouble.

The law creates reasons for action, and in some cases the wrongness of a contrary action will be seen to arise from its legal prohibition. This is true of many violations of tax and traffic laws. The core of the criminal law, however, is the prohibition of certain types of action that are regarded as immoral independently of the law, and prior to it. On the wrongness of these actions we expect general agreement, not only within a given society but also among members of different societies. Travelers going from country to country can reasonably assume, without consulting lawbooks, that most forms of theft and physical assault will be forbidden wherever they go.

Judgments of honesty and dishonesty constitute an interesting area of shared morality, similar in some ways to the criminal law. It is widely agreed that lying and breaking promises are generally wrong. While these offenses are legally penalized only in special cases, we are apt to be quite intolerant of them in other ways. They are among the types of action we feel we should not have to put up with. This is no accident. Without shared disapproval of dishonesty and deception, human practices of communication and cooperative planning would be all but impossible.

Ethical Theory and the Limits of Common Morality

This area of general moral agreement has its limits, although they can hardly be defined with precision. Indeed, most particular points of moral agreement shade into controversy. The killing of human beings, and violent assault on them, are generally condemned—but there is deep disagreement about the morality of warfare, capital punishment, and euthanasia. We can agree about the general wrongness of stealing more readily than about the limits of individual property rights in relation to the state. Other things being equal, it is surely wrong to tell a lie—but are there exceptions, and if so, what are they? Opinions differ about these questions. Selfishness is bad; and often it is plainly recognizable. But what seems selfish to some may be regarded by others as the innocent pursuit of happiness, or even the laudable pursuit of personal excellence. While we agree on a number of principles of fairness, there is certainly much disagreement about what is fair in concrete situations. Moreover, we think it is important to hold open the possibility that we are wrong about some of the moral points on which we do agree. We must be prepared to give a hearing to the reformer who claims that all or most of us have wrongly condoned slavery or the slaughter of animals for food.

These limits of common morality are very important for the development of ethical theory. The moral life in its earliest stages is a response to the actual demands of those with whom the child is linked in society, and I believe that those demands still constitute a major part of moral motivation for virtually all adults. It might seem natural, therefore, to identify moral obligation with the demands of society. The main obstacle to this identification is the fact that society speaks with a divided voice on many issues, and that we believe society has sometimes spoken with an erring voice on important matters.

What counts as common morality, indeed, is not only imprecise but variable and relative to one's historical and cultural context. Common morality covers a larger area relative to North American society in the 1980s than it does in relation the whole contemporary human world. It covers an even larger area in relation to the set of subcultures within which a typical individual (even a fairly cosmopolitan individual) lives most of his or her life. We will rarely have to deal with people with whom we do not have significant fragments of morality in common, but finding the shared basis for moral discussion can be a difficult practical problem. The imprecision and relativity of the concept of a common morality would also pose a serious theoretical problem if I meant to define what is objective in morality as what is common. But that is not my intention.

Much ethical theory can be seen as trying to find the nature of moral obligation and the morally good in something that transcends the divided and fallible voice of society. Candidates for this role have included the Form of the Good, (human) nature, pure practical reason, and modern variants on these ideas. The commands of the gods were probably the first candidates, and I have argued elsewhere that an account of the nature of ethical right and wrong in terms of the commands of a loving God affords the best possibility of finding a transcendent ground of moral obligation that is consonant with the social nature of obligation.[2] Prescriptivist and existentialist metaethical views have also insisted on the possible transcendence of society's demands by individual moral decision, but at the expense of the objectivity of morals.

More relevant to our present purpose is another relation of ethical theory to the limits of pretheoretical agreement in morals. One of the main motives for ethical theorizing is to try to resolve rationally some or all of the moral issues that common sense seems to leave unresolved or doubtfully resolved. If disagreement or uncertainty prevails on a point of ethics about which we are concerned, we should surely want to think as clearly and carefully about it as we can. And we may well suppose that a general understanding of the nature and grounds of moral rightness and goodness would provide us with criteria that would be helpful in settling moral issues. In this way we might hope to reach firm and shared conclusions about previously debated questions in ethics.

These hopes have in large measure been disappointed. There are many points of ethics on which there is wide agreement, as noted earlier. But no comprehensive ethical theory commands anything approaching general agreement. I have mentioned several of the varieties of objectivism and subjectivism that flourish in metaethics. And in normative ethics utilitarianism is vigorously defended and vigorously opposed. Even among opponents of utilitarianism who agree in giving a fundamental place to rights and liberties, there are disagreements in both theoretical foundations and political conclusions as deep as those between Rawls and Nozick. Nothing in the history of modern secular ethical theory gives reason to expect that general agreement on a single comprehensive ethical theory will ever be achieved—or that, if achieved, it would long endure in a climate of free inquiry.

Even agreement on the encompassing framework of an ethical theory, moreover, will not necessarily lead to agreement on particular ethical questions. The difficulty of assigning values to the expected utility of alternative courses of action leads utilitarians to differ widely about concrete issues. This problem is not peculiar to utilitarianism, since any plausible ethical theory will count the goodness or badness of expected consequences as at least an important source of moral reasons. If we were to agree on a natural law framework for ethics, there would remain notorious possibilities for disagreement about whether a particular action (for instance, any particular sexual practice) is contrary to nature.

I certainly do not mean to suggest that ethical theory is useless, or that one cannot reasonably believe and advocate any ethical theory. I have my own opinions in ethical theory (I oppose utilitarianism, for example, and favor a form of divine command metaethics). And thinking hard about ethical theory can be of great benefit to the moral life. It helps one to form one's own ethical conclusions in a more reasoned and consistent way. It can deepen one's understanding of ethical issues and increase one's sensitivity to the whole range of principles and reasons on which people might want to rely in deciding them. This can hardly fail to be helpful in trying to find common ground with others in ethical discussion; and it is my experience that ethical theorists are fairly often able to propose for an ethical problem a reasoned resolution that will command wide acceptance. The point that I want to emphasize in the present context is that while ethical theory is very useful for our common moral discourse, it is not itself an area in which general agreement is to be expected.

Ethical theory is also not an area in which general agreement is needed for such common morality as we possess. The main features of that morality are learned rather early in life, as I have pointed out, whereas most people reach adulthood with little awareness of systematic ethical theory, as teachers of ethics know. It follows that our common morality is possible without a generally accepted ethical theory, since it is possible with

virtually no ethical theory at all. It does not immediately follow, of course, that common morality remains possible when ethical theory is developed and turns out to be a subject fraught with deep and apparently permanent disagreements that are known to many of the leaders of society. In fact, however, that is the situation in ethical theory, and the common morality I have described still exists.

The impact of ethical theory on common morality is limited because virtually everyone has more confidence in the central dictates of shared morality than in any ethical theory as such. An ethical theory of whose correctness I am persuaded may reasonably lead me to depart from the teachings of "common sense" in a few cases. But if an ethical theory were to imply that lying, stealing, and killing people are not generally wrong—so much the worse for the theory. Ethical theorists are generally at pains to establish that their theories do not have such consequences, and if possible they try to show that they can explain the "data" of common morality. Utilitarians, for example, try to show that lying generally has bad consequences (and hence less expected utility than truthfulness). The relation of ethical theory to common morality bears some resemblance to the relation of physical theory to ordinary beliefs about physical objects. The belief that a pint of mercury is heavier than a pint of water was prevalent long before quantum mechanics came on the scene, and it will still prevail a hundred years from now, even if quantum mechanics has by then been long superseded. Similarly, most of the precepts of common morality can be expected to survive the vagaries of ethical theory.

Religious Ethics and Common Morality

In view of the controversial character of religious theses, does their introduction into ethical theory undermine common morality or diminish the chances for ethical agreement? No, we may reply on the basis of the foregoing argument, for there is no realistic chance of general agreement on even a secular ethical theory, and common morality does not depend on agreement in ethical theory. I believe this answer is substantially correct; but it needs some qualifications, or the observance of some distinctions.

First we must be clear that we cannot plausibly assert the moral innocence of *all* religious theses, nor should we want to. Some religious theses have had horribly immoral consequences. For examples we have only to think of the religious or quasi-religious teachings that have led people to think it right to commit what we should call murder, on a larger or a smaller scale. Some religious beliefs, on the other hand, such as those that inspired many of the leaders in British and American movements to abolish slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, have surely been

better than the common morality of their time and place, and have provided a prophetic basis for correcting it.[3] My claim then is not that religious theses cannot be opposed to common morality, but that the fact that a thesis is religious does not imply that its inclusion in an ethical theory is subversive of common morality.

While we may reasonably hope that a religious ethics will in general support the demands of common morality, we must also expect that it will include additional demands that are not part of common morality. This fact is perfectly compatible with common morality, provided that common morality is conceived as the large area of overlap of the diverse moralities of different people and groups of people. If common morality were conceived as the complete morality of every participant, then it would seem to be in competition with the various religions and their ethics, and from their point of view it would appear as something like a false religion. But I think it is more accurate to regard common morality as a set of agreements among people who typically also hold other, less widely shared ethical beliefs.

With regard to religious and other theories in the field generally, if not happily, called "metaethics," it is also important to distinguish between what we may call the semantics of morals, the metaphysics of morals, and the epistemology of morals. I take my examples from divine command theories, though they are certainly not the only theological theories in this area. A simple divine command theory in the *semantics* of morals might claim that in the discourse of theistic believers, 'wrong' simply *means* 'forbidden by God'. This theory would seem to imply that a common morality, or even common moral discourse, between theists and atheists is impossible, since the atheists can hardly mean the same thing by 'wrong'. Such a view might therefore tend to undermine common morality. But it seems more likely that the theory will be seen as refuted by the manifest actuality of common moral discourse between theists and atheists.

One might still try to maintain a theological theory in the semantics of morals, modifying it to try to explain how ethical comunication between believers and nonbelievers is possible. I once pursued this line, arguing that the meaning of 'wrong' is partly the same and partly different for theists and atheists.[4] Now, however, I am inclined to embrace a religiously neutral semantics of morals. I think that the meaning of 'wrong' is the same for theists and atheists, but that one can understand that meaning, and be a competent user of the word 'wrong', without knowing the nature of wrongness. All that the meaning of 'wrong' tells us about the nature of wrongness is that wrongness is the property (if there is one) that best fills a certain role.[5] Whether there is such a property and, if so, what it is, are questions not for the semantics but for the metaphysics of morals.

It is in the *metaphysics* of morals, then, that I would now maintain a divine command theory of the nature of wrongness. It says that the property of being contrary to the commands of a loving God is the property that best fills the role indicated by the meaning of 'wrong', and therefore it is the property of wrongness. This theory in the metaphysics of morals is not likely to conflict with any of the dictates of common morality. It purports instead to explain the nature of the obligation that is involved in those dictates. Our agreement on the general wrongness of lying, stealing, and killing need not be disturbed by disagreements in the metaphysics of morals about what wrongness consists in, any more than our agreement that two plus two equals four need be disturbed by disagreements in the metaphysics of mathematics about the nature of numbers.

It is important at this point that I am thinking of common morality only as a loosely recognizable set of overlapping agreements. If you think of it as a well-defined structure of thought, and particularly if you think of it as an autonomous system to be sharply distinguished from other systems of ethical thought, you may be more disturbed by the suggestion that a rationale for some of the concepts used in it can be given best in theological terms, or in other relatively controversial terms. That might seem to compromise the autonomy of the common morality.[6] I do not believe, however, in a common morality that is sufficiently theoretical to have an autonomy that might be compromised in this way.

It is in the *epistemology* of morals that the most serious questions arise about the compatibility of religious theories with common morality. Divine command metaethics, as I have conceived it thus far, is not a theory in the epistemology of morals, although it implies a need for such a theory. It is a conceptual truth that a command does not exist unless it has been in some way issued, promulgated, or communicated to those who are subject to it. Divine commands must therefore have been revealed if they are to ground moral obligations; so divine command metaethics requires, in effect, a theory of revelation, in the sense of divine self-disclosure. But many different theories of revelation would be compatible with divine command metaethics in the general form in which I have developed it.

For present purposes we may adopt a rough division of revelation into "general" and "special" forms. General revelation takes place through facts about life and the world that are generally accessible to human beings, and through tendencies of belief and feeling that are natural to human beings or at least widely and commonly present in people of different places, times, and cultures. The cross-cultural tendency of people to regard lying as generally wrong, for example, can be regarded as a general revelation of a divine prohibition. Special revelation, on the other hand, takes place through more particular phenomena that have a more or less precise location in history. It may be addressed only to one person

or one community; if it is to be more widely disseminated, it will be known to most people only through a link of tradition or culture that connects them with the original source. Divine commands made known through sacred texts, authoritative traditions, or unique personal inspirations would be examples of special revelation. It is possible to believe, as the Deists did, in general revelation alone, or in special revelations that only republish general revelation. There have also been those who have believed that God's commands are promulgated exclusively through special revelation. On the whole, however, I think it has been more typical of the Jewish and Christian traditions to believe both in general revelation and in special revelation that adds something to the general revelation—whether or not the terminology of "revelation" is employed in this way.

A theory of *general revelation*, as such, creates no problems for common morality. The principles that have wide enough acceptance to be genuinely a part of common morality can plausibly be regarded (by divine command theorists) as commands of God generally revealed. If the consensus favoring some of these principles is relatively recent, the disagreement of earlier generations or cultures can be accommodated by the idea of "progressive revelation" that is a feature of some theories of general as well as special revelation. And the bases of ethical belief that are given theological significance by a theory of general revelation are for the most part those that are generally acknowledged in our common moral reasoning. This is not to say that no socially controversial ethical precept could be regarded as generally revealed. Unlimited exploitation of other living things for human benefit, for example, although regarded by many as morally appropriate in principle, might be viewed by others as contrary to the will of God revealed in nature; the latter might view the former as insensitive to a revelation available to all in the structure of nature and our capacity to respond to it.[7] There is no reason to expect a theory of general revelation to be more disruptive of shared moral discourse than any other theory in the epistemology of morals.

Theories of *special revelation*, particularly those that recognize no other way of knowing God's commands, may seem more disruptive. If one thinks that right and wrong are constituted by God's commands, and that those commands are promulgated exclusively in special revelation, how can one take seriously the reasons offered in ethical discussion by those who do not believe in that special revelation? Even some quite extreme theories of special revelation, however, leave more room than might at first appear for sharing moral discourse with nonbelievers. Consider a view according to which God's will is made known *only* in the Bible. Unless their exegesis is quite bizarre, those who hold this view will agree, for example, that killing, stealing, and lying are generally wrong, and that it is good to relieve human need. They will in fact accept most of

the normative principles that serve as reasons in the shared discourse of common morality regarding concrete ethical issues. And, in applying these principles to particular cases not described in the Bible, they will face many of the same difficulties, and rely on most of the same patterns of reasoning, as anyone else. They will of course think that many of their fellow citizens do not accept the only ultimately valid ground of belief in the moral principles they share; but this disagreement about metaethical foundations need not be a barrier to the giving and accepting of reasons based on the principles. In some cases, to be sure, their views may keep them from carrying an ethical discussion very far. If their hermeneutics is rigidly authoritarian, there may be some socially controversial issues, perhaps in sexual morality, on which they will hold firmly to principles for which they are not prepared to give any reason except an appeal to religious authority, and against which they will not seriously entertain any argument at all.

Could a theological epistemology of morals come into more serious and systematic conflict with the requirements of common moral discourse? Consider what we may call an "exclusively charismatic" epistemology of morals, according to which ethical truths are made known only in personal inspiration, on a case-by-case basis. Since no general ethical principles are revealed according to this theory, those who hold it (if anyone does) will not accept general principles as reasons for any ethical conclusion, and they will thus be unable to participate in the exchange of reasons that constitutes common moral discourse. But is this a theory of anything that is still recognizable as a morality? Can we conceive of a moral education that does not involve the teaching of certain normative principles as generally binding? It is very doubtful whether we should count as a morality any form of life or thought that does not embrace at least a large proportion of the general principles that belong to common morality. And since acceptance of a large proportion of these principles—and of ordinary forms of reasoning—is all that is required for entry into common moral discourse, it is hard to see how anything that is truly an epistemology *of morals*, theological or nontheological, could conflict radically with the requirements of common moral discourse.

Conflict and Democracy

Many political theorists, both liberal and communitarian (Rawls and MacIntyre, for example), seem to think that more agreement in ethical theory than I believe possible is required for a really good social order. While in various ways they wish not only to recognize but to preserve possibilities of disagreement, they think that we ought to hold in common a conception of justice that is sufficiently developed theoretically to give

us at least some hope of arriving at reasoned agreement about moral issues in politics, so that we will not have to resolve them through conflict of brute political forces.[8] It is controversial whether religious ethical theories are likely to be incompatible with such a common theory of justice, but some certainly suspect that they are.[9]

In my opinion the best response to this suspicion is to argue that agreement on a theory of justice is not required for a society as good as we can reasonably hope to achieve. What is required, in addition to the rather untheoretical jumble of agreements I have already described as common morality, is agreement on some principles of *constitutional law*, which can also be described as agreement on the forms and limits of acceptable conflict. Obviously agreement shades into disagreement in constitutional law as well as in morals; we simply need widespread agreement on a sufficiently large and central area of the subject. My argument amounts to a rationale for constitutional democracy, a rationale broadly inspired by the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr, though I make no attempt to follow him in detail.

One of Niebuhr's greatest contributions is the extensive and many-sided development of his perception of the inevitability of conflict in even the best of social orders. He admired Marxism's realistic view of conflict in pre-Marxist societies, but he saw that this realism evaporated into utopianism when the Marxist gaze was turned to what would happen after the triumph of the proletariat—and that the utopian belief in the end of conflict served to justify institutionalization of a particularly repressive and coercive form of conflict. Authoritarianism has often been sentimental or naively optimistic about conflict, thinking that the solution to the problem of conflict within a society is the establishment of a good and wise authority—the philosopher-king or the dictatorship of the proletariat, for example. Because the good and wise authority would deserve the trust of everyone, there would be no need for anyone (or, at any rate, for any good person) to oppose the authority. Ideally, therefore, conflict should disappear. But no authority is really good and wise enough to deserve such trust; and the authority's sins and errors will be perceived more clearly, as Niebuhr argues, by those whose power is less.

In practice, therefore, authoritarianism leads only to worse forms of conflict. People are intimidated from disagreeing with the authority, or if they do become conscious of differing with the opinions or interests of the authority, they are forcibly prevented from giving effect to their views. Alternatively, they present a threat of change that is much more violent than it would be in a less authoritarian political order, and they provoke a more violent reaction.

A democratic political order, by contrast, is an open, reasonably fair and honest, minimally coercive system for the nonviolent working through of social conflicts. There is more than one way of trying to re-

solve a conflict without violence. One way is to try to reach agreement on the right solution through reasoning. That is the method that rationalistic assumptions in political theory should lead us to expect in a really good social order. Much of the recent literature on moral problems of a pluralistic society seems to proceed on the assumption that agreement achieved through rational persuasion is the main alternative to violence. This assumption may well be a main source of fears that the influence of religion on ethical beliefs bearing on our common life will be damaging, for even those most interested in reasoning about religious issues do not usually have great hopes for the achievement of agreement thereby.

There are other alternatives to violence, however. One that is important in democracy and most other political systems is compromise. It requires no extraordinary experience to recognize that it is commonly less important for the peace of a community that people believe that the result achieved was right in principle than that they feel that everyone got something and no party to the controversy was crushed. Compromise shares with majority vote the advantage that it does not require anyone to admit an error. Agreeing, as a result of rational persuasion, that the other party was right may often be the most virtuous way of ending a dispute, but it is rarely the easiest. We would be wise not to expect too much of it if we are devising ways for ordinary sinners to live together.

The method of nonviolent conflict resolution that is most characteristic of democracy is majority vote,[10] and it is not a form of rational persuasion. Plato was surely right in contending that a majority vote is not a plausible way of determining the most rational conclusion to a debate. If we want a concrete way of registering an agreement reached by reasoning, consensus (or perhaps a 90 percent vote) would seem to be the indicated procedure. Of course consensus is not a workable method of government, because too often it is impossible to obtain a consensus. That is in large part because reasoning about moral issues in politics too often fails to lead to agreement. It seems particularly unlikely to produce consensus on the most theoretical issues. We had better not need an agreed theory of justice, because we are not likely to get one.

In Niebuhrian perspective this too is a manifestation of our sin. One of the reasons (though not the only one, in my opinion) why we often cannot reach agreement about moral issues is that our excessive interest in our own welfare, and even more in our own power and our own reputation for rightness, distorts our judgment in profound but largely hidden ways. Rationality, as Niebuhr insisted, is an essential resource for combating this blindness, but the distortion is too subtle and too deeply rooted to be eradicated by reasoning; excessive confidence in the objectivity of our reasoning will only make us easier prey to self-deception.

Majority rule is a symbol whose reality is elusive. What it unquestionably does provide is the most obviously fair procedure for determining the

result of a vote or election. And I believe that votes and elections are best seen as a form of ritual combat that provides not only for the decision of political issues but above all for a nonviolent transfer of power. Without some such institution, power will be transferred not at all or with violence. The knowledge of this fact will tempt those without power to violence and those with it to repression and preventive violence. That is in fact what happened in earlier, more authoritarian stages of our own political culture, in which opposition was often hardly distinguished from treason. The violent results can be seen in the history of England—a relatively stable society—during the centuries in which monarchs ruled as well as reigned. From the Norman conquest to the time when the transition to parliamentary government made possible the concept of "His (or Her) Majesty's *loyal* opposition," almost half the reigns came to a violent end, belying the power of the hereditary principle to avert conflict.

The concept of a loyal opposition is indeed an even more fundamental feature of our political tradition than majority rule. Such approach as we have made to an ideal of majority rule has come only through very strenuous efforts over more than a century to free the right to vote from restrictions and impediments related to economic status, gender, and race. But these efforts have taken place in the context of constitutions that already provided ways in which opposition to current policies and leadership could be expressed without disloyalty, and could possibly prevail. The existence of such a constitution does require widespread agreement in the society, not on a theory of justice, but on the constitution itself. More than agreement, it requires clear commitment to certain principles of constitutional law on the part of all or almost all of the groups and individuals possessing significant power in the society. They must trust each other to pursue their conflicts within the limits established by the constitution. Most important, they must trust each other to refrain from the most blatant forms of violence, fraud, and deception, and to yield power when they lose certain votes.

It has proved possible for adherents of very diverse religions and ethical theories—not to mention very diverse social and economic interests and ideals—to maintain a common commitment to a constitution of this sort, and to maintain it through gradual change and development of the constitution itself. How is this possible? Why are we willing to yield power nonviolently to political movements we vigorously oppose? No doubt the answers to these questions are very complex, and the emotional grip of political tradition on a nation plays an important part. But it is surely an important factor that the violence and other evils attendant on both anarchy and authoritarianism make it easy for adherents of quite different ethical theories to conclude that it is better for them, and for others, to take turns losing and gaining power in a constitutional regime

than to try to cling to power by brute force, even though considerable goods may be lost when power is lost.

It is thus the desirability of a relatively nonviolent and uncoercive political order that provides, in my opinion, the strongest reason, with the widest appeal, for agreement on a more or less democratic constitution. This motive is fully as compelling from a communitarian as from an individualistic point of view. And it will generally support developments that would make the constitution more liberal and more democratic; the protection of civil liberties obviously makes the society less coercive, and the aim of providing nonviolent ways for social conflict to be carried on is served by the extension of political participation to all groups in the society.

This view involves a frank acceptance of conflict, which is to be kept within agreed limits but not eradicated. The fear of even relatively nonviolent conflict is one of the subtlest and most dangerous enemies of liberty and of justice, especially when the fear masquerades as a dream of untroubled social harmony. Conflict is inevitable—and, I would add, not altogether undesirable. The meeting of will with will, which almost always involves conflict at some level, is the very substance of personal relationships, which would not be fully personal without it. It is through conflict, or something like it, that we know the otherness of self and other. The oppositions that arise between our wills and our parents' wills are necessary for our differentiating ourselves from them. The fact that the world is in some ways contrary, and in some ways unresponsive, to our wills is what keeps us from regarding it all as an extension of ourselves. This fact takes on metaphysical dimensions in the philosophy of Berkeley, who defines the "reality" of sensible things partly in terms of the involuntariness of our sensations of them. Interpersonally, the independence of will from will, as manifested from time to time in conflict, is essential to the reality of relationship. We have learned to be suspicious of marriages in which the spouses claim they have no fights. In politics, likewise, conflict could hardly be eradicated without excluding from the political process the selfhood of most of the individuals, and the identity of many of the groups, in the society.

This is not to say that a democratic constitution should be viewed merely as rules for a contest of naked self-interest. It is important for the health of a democratic society that the participants, and especially the leaders, should often try sincerely to do what is fair and what is best for people in general. This of itself does not eliminate conflict, since our views of what is fair and best can conflict as much as our self-interest. But a democratic political order could hardly function if there were not a large measure of agreement in the society about what is right. One feature of democracy for which this is essential is the mutual respect and trust be-

tween opposing political leaders without which the self-restraint that limits the forms and methods of conflict would hardly be possible.

The moral agreement democracy needs, however, is not to be found in a common ethical theory or even in a common theory of justice, but in the unsystematic plurality of agreements that constitute common morality. These agreements make it possible to approximate consensus on some moral issues in politics. They do not enable us to settle all issues about justice by reasoning together; they leave some such issues to be settled by contests of will and political strength within the limits set by the constitution. But that is a large part of what democratic institutions are for.

Democratic institutions, of course, are no guarantee against injustice, and in fact they have often permitted it, as have all other forms of human government. All strong human interests (and that definitely includes religious interests) can tempt persons or groups to acts of injustice. But the argument that therefore it would be better for political society if religion, as a source of passionate interests, could be avoided altogether will rightly seem to religious persons no more persuasive than the observation, doubtless true in some sense, that we would cause a lot less trouble if we were all dead. Most of the meaning and value of human life depends on strong interests, and those who have serious religious interests will see them as particularly important for the meaning and value of life.

Can Religion Flourish in a Pluralistic Society?

Thus far I have argued that believers' use of religious theses in their ethical theories is not a threat to the sort of common morality that is possible in a pluralistic society and necessary for the health of the society. I want to conclude with a look in the opposite direction, at the question whether pluralism is a threat to the health of religious ethics, or indeed of religion itself. The American political and religious communities have tended to answer this question in the negative, pointing with some satisfaction to the fact that the percentage of participation in organized religion is much higher in America than in most of those industrialized countries in which a single religious tradition has been historically established. Disturbing questions are also raised, however, as to whether this complacency is warranted. Are religions in our pluralistic society like the seedlings Jesus described that spring up quickly in rocky soil but have no deep root (Mark 4:5–6)? Does the untidy array of moral principles and political institutions on which our society does agree constitute its real religion, the "civil religion" of America, as it is often called? Are the plurality of faiths that most of us officially profess left thereby with the form, but without the power, of religion (2 Timothy 3:5)? Are those faiths so margi-

nalized by their exclusion from the realm of what is commonly accepted in society that it is difficult or impossible for most of their adherents to realize their relevance to the political, cultural, and professional aspects of their lives, or to make them the sort of organizing principle of an integrated life that religion is supposed to be?

There is undoubtedly much to be said for an affirmative answer to these questions; and they are reinforced by developments in the study of religion that call our attention to the intimate relations between religion and culture. We know that in preliterate societies religion is so inextricably interwoven with other aspects of the culture that even to speak of religion as a separate category is to import an alien conception from our life into the understanding of theirs. We are charmed, and sometimes inspired, by the way in which religion has permeated everyday life through total cultural acceptance in many times and places, even in more complex and developed traditions such as those of Christianity. We see that this permeation was made possible by the religious unanimity of a complete society, and that it is not possible, at least not in the same way, in a pluralistic society. As we think about these things we may be tempted to ask whether we can really, in the fullest sense, have a religion unless we all have the same religion.

Similar concerns arise as we think about what it is for an individual to acquire a religious faith. Attention to the role of story and ritual in religion, and to the integration of verbal and nonverbal behavior in a religious "form of life," support the view that becoming an adherent of a religion cannot be adequately described in terms of forming beliefs alone, that it is in many ways like learning a language or a complex social skill.[11] Such skills are in general best learned by total immersion in the language or practice, and better learned the earlier in life one begins. These thoughts could easily lead to the view that the ideal situation for religion is one in which people are steeped from earliest childhood in a single religious tradition that organizes their whole social experience—and that no other arrangment can be more than a second best for religion.

These views do not seem to me entirely wrong. I am personally addicted to a pluralistic society with rather fluid boundaries between the diverse traditions in it. I think such a society has great advantages in what it makes possible, both in the rich awareness of human potentialities and achievements and in the development of individual and ecclesiastical autonomy and identity. Even if we wanted to, most of us will not be able to avoid living in a society that is more or less of this type. Nonetheless I agree that something religiously (and culturally) valuable may be lost in these circumstances. We cannot reasonably hope to enjoy in a pluralistic society *all* the advantages of a religiously homogeneous society. "The best things in life" do not necessarily cost money, but they are rarely "free."

Some social arrangements seem to have few advantages, but all have disadvantages.

I will argue here simply that from the particular viewpoint of Christianity there is something questionable about excessive nostalgia for a religiously homogenous society. Christianity as we know it took shape in the religiously, culturally, and ethnically pluralistic society of the Roman Empire. The Christian religion would never have existed if its formation and transmission required a totally Christian social context. And today the Christian church is growing most rapidly in regions whose historic traditions are quite alien to those that have been most closely associated with Christianity.

Characteristic of the Christian tradition is a distinction, if not always a separation, between church and nation, and between church and state.[12] By contrast Judaism, as the dominant faith of an ethnic group and deeply connected with their sense of nationhood, does not make the former distinction so clearly; and Islam, as a faith that began in a militant campaign to reshape a whole society, is less inclined to distinguish between religious and political institutions. These distinctions in Christianity are undoubtedly connected with the fact that it began as the faith of a minority within both its original Jewish ethnic group and the larger society. The New Testament, however, is already deeply marked with both distinctions. The distinction between church and nation aroused divisive controversy at first, but the New Testament is unanimous in characterizing Christianity as a movement that does not aspire in any ordinary historical way to political power, and in tracing this stance to Jesus himself. Because these distinctions shape its self-conception from the outset, Christianity is intrinsically adapted to existence in a pluralistic environment.

Christian theology in the twentieth century has rightly emphasized the early church's resistance to religious syncretism. But it is clear from such a document as the Epistle to Diognetus that Christians of the first centuries also were conscious of sharing with most of their pagan neighbors enough ethical convictions to constitute what I would call a common morality—and that both their disagreements and their agreements with the rest of their society were important to the identity of typical Christians as such.

It is not hard to locate historically the point at which the creation of an all-embracingly (if not ideally!) Christian society and culture became a real possibility. This happened with the conversion of Constantine—a development that is widely deplored in the church today. I do not deplore it. It is hardly thinkable that the church that had survived the rigors of the persecution of Diocletian would have declined Constantine's offer of imperial favor. The Christianization of the empire, and of the European civilizations that succeeded it, had both advantages and disad-

vantages, from both Christian and more generally human perspectives, as does the pluralism of our own society. The Christian tradition has certainly been enriched by the realization of some of the possibilities of a comprehensively Christian society and culture. Some aspects of specifically religious and distinctively Christian life and thought were developed after Constantine in a way that may not have been possible, and at any rate did not happen, in the embattled minority church of the martyrs. My main thesis, however, about the Constantinian turning point in the history of Christianity is that one does not have to regard it as a fall from grace to see that the religiously homogeneous society to which it led cannot plausibly be regarded as the only setting in which Christianity can flourish.

Indeed the church had barely begun to be politically and culturally successful before there arose, in the monastic movement, the first of many attempts to recreate, within a church that had become too all-embracing, a functional equivalent of the distinction between the church and the world. The need felt by many Christians for such a distinction is connected with the importance of *conversion* in the Christian tradition—an importance that seems hard to reconcile with the idea that the best attainable sort of Christian life would have to begin with childhood education in a totally Christian social context. I have no wish to propound an extremely conversionist theology of the Christian life and no objection in principle to infant baptism, in part because I think that birth or adoption into a Christian family does often mark the single most decisive point in a person's initiation into Christianity. But with such examples as Paul and Augustine, how can we suppose that childhood immersion in a Christian culture is a uniquely privileged mode of entry into Christianity?

The case of Augustine seems specially worthy of attention. By virtue of his *Confessions* his is perhaps the paradigmatic spiritual journey for Western Christendom. It is clear that despite early exposure to Christianity, his way led through a sampling of the variety of religious alternatives offered by the still pluralistic Roman world, including a period of commitment to Manichaeism. And if we are inclined to think that the things he was most ashamed of in his personal relationships were not always those he ought to have been most ashamed of, we may also be less ready than he to deplore his spiritual wanderings. It was clear indeed to Augustine himself that much that he had gleaned from pagan culture, particularly from the Platonic tradition, remained a part of his eventual Christian awareness of God.[13] Conversion, as we find it in Augustine, is not merely a matter of turning out of one way into another. It is also, and perhaps much more, a matter of reintegrating one's life, and one's sense of the world, around a new center—or, as in Augustine's case, around a center that may not be entirely new.

Viewed in this way, conversion is a necessary feature of Christian existence even for people who have been Christians all their lives. All Christians have a recurrent need not only for repentance but also for reintegration of self and world around Christ. The idea that a Christian community can present its children with a preintegrated life is in my opinion inconsistent with the transcendent and eschatological dimensions of Christianity. Christianity is more than a practice or social skill that can be taught. It is also a framework for grappling with realities that no church can control—realities including not only (and most notably) God, but also sin, suffering, interpersonal and political conflict, and all the marvelous diversity of the human and natural world and of our own psychology. In these confrontations one's life and one's awareness are inevitably changed profoundly enough, from time to time, to require a new reintegration—religiously, a new step of conversion. And because the church is not the perfected Kingdom of God, the breaking, dissolution, or reshaping of some of our most religiously sanctioned patterns may be part of what is required to bring us nearer to the Kingdom. For such a pilgrimage, I think, a pluralistic society is not a less favorable environment than a religiously homogeneous society.

NOTES

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1. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 388.

2. Robert M. Adams, "Divine Commands and the Social Nature of Obligation," *Faith and Philosophy* 4 (1987): 262–75.

3. It is not my intention here to debate the question whether the influence of religion on human history has been more good than bad. I doubt whether that question has a clear answer, and it would certainly be beyond my competence to give it an answer.

4. Robert M. Adams, "A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness," in Gene Outka and John P. Reeder, Jr., eds., *Religion and Morality* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1973), pp. 318–47; reprinted as chap. 7 of Robert M. Adams, *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

5. I have expounded this view much more fully in "Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 7 (1979): 66–79; reprinted as chap. 9 of my *Virtue of Faith*.

6. I wonder whether some concern such as this moves Jeffrey Stout in his criticism of Basil Mitchell's proposal of a theological "rationale" for "the traditional

conscience" (Mitchell, *Morality: Religious and Secular* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980], p. 120). Stout seems to fear that Mitchell's approach might undermine common morality. He writes: "until theism proves able to gather a reasonably broad rational consensus around a specific conception of the good, an eventuality that now seems remote, we probably should not follow advice like Mitchell's. The risks of reviving religious conflict like that of early modern Europe are too great" (Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics after Babel* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1988], p. 222f.). This fear seems implausible. It may be debated whether our society still contains the seeds of really disastrous religious conflict. But in any event it is most unlikely that such a conflict would be either ignited or averted by theories about the foundations of ethics. Stout's fear is the more surprising because he seems largely to agree with me about the limits of the moral agreement to be expected in our society. He does suggest, however, as in the reference to "*rational* consensus" (my emphasis) in the above passage, common morality requires for its viability a certain rational coherence. Perhaps he thinks this rational coherence would be threatened if the common morality employs concepts that depend for their best rationale on beliefs not generally shared; I am tempted to read pp. 221–25 of *Ethics after Babel* as such a suggestion. I think the only kind of common morality for which we can realistically hope is too untheoretical either to need or to sustain the sort of rational coherence that would figure in such a worry.

7. This would be the view of James M. Gustafson in *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), except that he would substitute 'purpose' for 'will'. See also the interesting treatment of environmental issues as an area of ethics in which religious reasons are likely to make a difference in Kent Greenawalt, *Religious Convictions and Political Choice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

8. John Rawls's position on these topics is subtle, and perhaps still in development, or even change. I am not certain how far I am disagreeing with him. Clearly he does not accept, and wants very much to avoid, the conclusion that religious theories about the foundations of ethics as such are a threat to justice or democracy. In "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14 (1985): 223–51, he has minimized his theoretical commitments in a way that he did not in *A Theory of Justice*. Already in *A Theory of Justice* he grants that "in a nearly just society . . . [t]here can, in fact, be considerable differences in citizens' conceptions of justice provided that these conceptions lead to similar political judgments" (p. 387; cf. p. 517). But the proviso incorporated in this statement is significant. It still seems to me that Rawls underemphasizes the combative aspects of a democratic polity and tends to overestimate the level of theoretical agreement in political ethics needed for an attainably just society.

9. See Richard Fern, "Religious Belief in a Rawlsian Society," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 15 (1987): 40–46.

10. I do not mean to imply that majority vote is the only method of nonviolent conflict resolution to be found in democracies. Democracies also require law courts, for example. I believe also that some constitutional restraints on majority rule, such as those provided by the Bill of Rights in the United States, are highly desirable in a democracy. And I think it is not a defect in a democratic constitution

if its actual workings give those who care most about a particular issue more influence in deciding it than is proportional to their numbers.

11. See George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984). I do not mean to ascribe to Lindbeck any objection to a pluralistic society.

12. Here a distinction between nation and state is presupposed but not elucidated in a systematic way. An example may help to make clear what I have in mind. The Austro-Hungarian Empire was a multinational state whose jurisdiction for some years included part, but never all, of the Polish nation.

13. Aurelius Augustinus, *Confessions*, bk. 7, chaps. 9, 20.