Does Europe Need God?

This lecture examines the question of whether a transcendental principle, which some will think of as God, is required as the foundation for what today most people interpret as a purely rational or secular business of building a consensual law-based society that is liberal and open. The question may seem disturbing or at least paradoxical, in that we have been taught by generations of liberal writers to think of the liberal and open society as being precisely defined by their exclusion of religious reference. Liberalism, they hold, generates a calm consensus that has replaced all the factionalism and animosity created by religious fundamentalisms. But as the liberal worldview became all-encompassing, it gradually lost its normative capacity. The intellectual fashion turned to an attack on what was now dismissively referred to as "the Enlightenment Project," and at the same time worried about the obscure sources in the human psyche that fed the new fundamentalisms. A superficial view presented the major threat to world stability as emanating from religious fanaticism, instead of interpreting the tragic events of the so-called Arab Spring as a backlash against a brutally imposed nexus of secularization and modernization.

I try to answer the question of the foundations of liberal society by first retracing an old debate about the origins of order; by then reflecting on the circumstances relatively recent disappearance of the language of the divine from political discourse (on both sides of the Atlantic); by examining the foundations of order on the basis of a concept of human dignity, and of the two psychological drives of compassion but also of competition generated by consciousness of human dignity; and finally by thinking about whether the centrality of dignity can be guaranteed by institutional means alone.

I

Formulating rules that are general and universal enough to cope with any arising unforeseen event is a challenging task. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle set out the logic of looking for a malleable rule: he thought as an analogy of the lead (rather than iron) rule that sculptors on the island of Lesbos used to cut curved lines: "When the law speaks universally, and a case arises on it which is not covered by the universal statement, then it is right, where the legislator fails us and has erred by oversimplicity, to correct the omission-to say what the legislator himself would have said had he been present, and would have put into his law if he had known."[1]Even in the Enlightenment, the complexity of following an appropriate rule was still presented not as best handled by obeying a rigorous algorithm, but by following an example or model. The *Encyclopédie* thus defined "rule" (regle) as the same as imitating a model: "for Christians, the life of Our Savior is the rule or model."[2]

What animating spirit is required by the law; or – in an alternative image – in what majesty does it need to wrap itself?

There is a great deal of historical experience that could be drawn on, but in fact Europeans have consistently defined their approach to this issue by reference to the precedent of ancient Rome. That experience is fundamental to the iconic accounts of Adam Smith as well as of Edward

[1] Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 5 x.
[2] *Encyclopédie*, "Regle" (Jaucourt): "la vie de Notre - Seigneur est *la regle* ou *le modele* des Chrétiens."Lorraine Daston gave an illuminating discussion of the changing approach to rules in Europe in her Lawrence Stone lectures in Princeton, April 2014.

Gibbon. We are still always referring to, and learning from the Romans. Rome is the model for decline and fall of a great commercial and imperial power, of self-destruction arising from internal pressures as much as from outside threats. But it is also fascinating to us because the decline appears in some way connected with the development of the major religion of modern European civilization. What is the relationship between prosperity and decadence?

The Roman Empire assimilated new areas into its imperial rule by incorporating the local theologies into a pluralistic religious universe. More gods could simply be added to the capacious Roman pantheon, and local deities would sit alongside the imperial gods without rivalry or clashes. Polytheism was based on a deep but politically motivated respect for difference and local tradition. Romans saw polytheism as a basis for imperial rule, so that Rome became the center of world religions: not just of the worship of the classic Roman gods, but also of the cults of Mithras, or Egyptian celebrations, and of course also of the highly intolerant Christianity.

The twenty-first century equivalent, in a world in which the central culture is no longer religious, is multiculturalism: the encouragement of a broad diversity of cultures with a call for mutual tolerance and comprehension. Inhabitants of industrial countries are proud that they no longer just have “western” music or traditional cuisine; they patronize oriental incense and mysticisms as well as scent-shops with French perfumes. The result has without doubt made modern life, particularly modern urban existence, much more interesting and rewarding.

But it involves the suspension of a particular human facility, that of judgment. The combination of diversity with the end of liability brings the enthusiastic acceptance of other practices, and a restraint on judgment about difference or “the other”. “Judgmental” becomes a damning attribute. The only basis for decision-making becomes a contentless utilitarianism, an approach originally developed at the moment when Europe was beginning its universal embrace. Will we too move from the polytheism of multiculturalism to an embrace of one transcendental faith? Should we?

II

A striking and actually relatively recent development of political language has been the expulsion or purgation of God – of invocations of the divine. This is a relatively recent process, over the last fifty years; and it is not explicable simply in terms of an inexorable process of secularization that progressively erodes religious belief and practice. A better explanation lies in a process of progressive build-up of expectations in a whole range of institutions – most prominently the state, the public sector, the government – which need be motivated in non-religious terms, because they depend on a strong concept of the human capacity to plan in detail and collectively to control the destiny of humans. When, we might think almost inevitably, these additional demands cannot be met, the result is disenchantment with the political process, and with society at large. The process that we describe too simply as “secularization” in this way does more than erode religion: it destroys its own fundaments.

The escalation of disillusion following after a long term secularization drive is evident on both sides of the Atlantic. In Europe, the transformation has probably been the most dramatic. Take the way in which the idea of Europe was articulated. At moments of crisis, 1848, 1945, or 1989, when political collapse, existential angst, and an explosion of the imagination came together, the answer “Europe” was held out in a remarkably consistent way. From Victor Hugo (1849): “The day will come when we will see these two vast groups, the United States of America and the United States of Europe, face to face, stretching out a hand over the oceans, exchanging

their products, their trade, their industries, their arts, their genius, clearing the globe, colonizing the deserts, improving creation under the eye of the Creator, and together combining, for the good of all, those two infinite forces, the fraternity of men and the power of God!" [3] From Winston Churchill (1946): "This noble continent […] is the fountain of Christian faith and Christian ethics. […] If Europe were once united in the sharing of its common inheritance, there would be no limit to the happiness, to the prosperity and glory which its three or four hundred million people would enjoy." [4] Or from Vaclav Havel (1996): "freedom and responsibility are two sides of the same coin and that freedom is thinkable only when it is based on a sense of responsibility toward an authority that transcends us?"[5]

The language of religious reference has simply disappeared in the middle of Europe's most recent crisis. Why? Briefly put, Europeans were too complacent that we had all the right institutions that were needed to deal with any eventuality. They had lost a sense of humility, of the fragility of human achievements, but also a sense of the power and creativity that is inherent in human capacity.

The same process is occurring in the United States, where the key constitutional principle of religious neutrality (no established religion) is increasingly retranslated into an aggressive secularism that both limits public forms of religious expression and is so all-embracingly tolerant that it holds religion up to ridicule.

Political order is in crisis at the same time as it loses its aura of the sacred. As Tony Blair's press guru Alastair Campbell put it, "We don't do God." The causal link between these two phenomena begins with disappointment after the heightened expectations of establishing consensus through a purely secular orientation. A striking indication of the modern tension – and the way that it has only recently permeated a general consciousness – is the recent turn of the philosopher Jürgen Habermas to a questing for alternative religious foundations for ethical or value positions.

III

I would propose that in the wake of the debacle of overall visions of how society should be planned, we should go back to some basic reasoning about human capacity. We should think about what makes society both decent and dynamic depends on two human capacities and their development. First, a notion of sympathy or compassion, an ability to put oneself in the mental vision of another being and to reflect on what it would mean "not necessarily to be me." There is an exclusive version of this kind of action: We lose ourselves in another, and are completely absorbed in romantic love. But there is also a wider and inclusive version: the Christian tradition recognizes this when we think of finding Christ in one another.

The great Abrahamic faiths recognize eating in common as a way of establishing a community. Christians treat the divine provision of manna in the desert (Exodus 16) and the miracle of the loaves and the fishes as an anticipation of the sacrament of communion. Many scholars suggest that the Last Supper is related to the Jewish Passover meal. The Quran also gives a substantial significance to manna.

Secondly, human beings are competitive, and seek preeminence. That makes for ingenuity, technical advancement, and the evolution of a more satisfactory base for human flourishing.

[3] Victor Hugo, *Douze discours*, Paris: Librairie nouvelle, 1851.
[4] Speech of September 19, 1946, http://www.churchill-society-london.org.uk/astonish.html.
[5] Vaclav Havel, "The Hope for Europe," *New York Review of Books*, June 20, 1996

Religions live organizationally on the competitive principle: as against each other, but also internally (think of the rivalry of Dominicans and Franciscans). But they also encourage people to see it as their duty to develop their capacities, to excel, and even to measure themselves against others (for instance, in the parable of the talents).

The most direct and obvious effect of competition is that it produces a better, more reliable and at the same time cheaper supply of goods, whose quality increases as suppliers compete with each other to sell to consumers. The larger and more competitive is the market, the more transportation (itself competitive) opens up markets, the greater the benefits. Competition thus contributes in a straightforward way to the fulfillment of human needs. By contrast, planned methods, however ingeniously executed, encounter bottlenecks which are not overcome because the decision-makers at the bottleneck have no motivation or incentive to take corrective action.

Competition has sometimes been seen as an ingenious way of inculcating virtue. Adam Smith appears to have made this argument when he reflected upon self-interest and in parallel evolved a partial theory of good or virtuous behavior. The passage about tradesmen's motives is probably the best-known and most quoted sentence of the *Wealth of Nations*: "it is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest."But Smith had also, in a separate work, made the complementary argument that "When the greater part of the people are merchants, they always bring probity and punctuality into fashion, and these are the principal virtues of commercial nations." [6]

Some religious figures saw a paradox in the way their doctrine urged excellence. John Wesley put it like this, in a famous passage that Max Weber made the key to his interpretation of the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*: "religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality, and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will pride, anger, and love of the world in all of its branches. […] Is there no way to prevent this – this continual decay of true religion? We ought not to prevent people from being diligent and frugal; we must exhort all Christians to gain all they can, and to save all they can; that is in effect to grow rich." [7] The "decay of true religion," or what Weber called disenchantment, thus followed an inexorable logic.

There is a solution to the Wesley/Weber dilemma. Each of the two desirable intrinsic characteristics of the human personality, caritas and competition, has its obverse, that develops when the two features do not work in balance with each other. Competition unmitigated by communality or caritas turns into a war of all against all. It is driven by a different characteristic, frequently described as a vice: envy. However solidarity without any competition to perform – and to demonstrate solidarity – becomes inactivity. Again, we often refer to this sort of behavior

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[6] Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976, p. 18; Adam Smith, *Lectures on Justice, Police, Revenue and Arms: Delivered in the University of Glasgow*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896, p. 255. Many modern authors move between the "butcher" passage and the "probity and punctuality" passage rather seamlessly: Jerry Z. Muller, *Adam Smith in His Time and Ours: Designing the Decent Society*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995, p. 132; Peter J. Dougherty, *Who's Afraid of Adam Smith: How the Market Got Its Soul*, New York: John Wiley, 2003, p.11; Yuval Levin, "Recovering the Case for Capitalism," *National Affairs*, 3, Spring 2010, pp. 126-7.

[7] Quoted in Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, New York: Routledge Classics, 2001, p. 118.

by using the language of vices: in this instance sloth or indolence. Monasteries – set up to realize the ultimate Christian life – in practice often became alternately centers of envy (in which monks resented each other) or sloth.

It is the capacities – for love, for excelling - that make humans worthy of respect. At the same time, we generalize this sense of dignity and insist that even human beings who in their current state may represent these capacities only rather poorly deserve exactly the same respect. Why? We think like that because we are aware of potential: the potential that lies within an infant (or of course an unborn child); but also, in the dignity of the aged, the potential for suffering and sickness that exists within all of us. Humans develop, and that is also a constituent part of their dignity.

IV

The vision of development or ripening is profoundly unfamiliar to the two currents of thought that have dominated a great deal of debate for the last century. For most of the twentieth century, the most powerful prevalent belief was a faith in mechanisms that offered to coordinate development on a large-scale, and promised to give a more efficient coordination than the chance outcome of the interactions of myriads of individuals responding to each other and to each others' needs and wishes. Planners like the idea of a central state rationalizing and directing the course of human progress, and eliminating wasteful and unnecessary competition that seems to stand in the way of cooperation and coordination.

On the other side of the ideological divide, social conservatives worry about the operation of a rule-based market economy, but on different grounds. They see competition as destructive not because it is chaotic and anti-growth but because it is destabilizing and tends to undermine traditions. Traditional institutions can resist that trend and represent the key to social cohesion. Such thinkers view marketing as seducing and purveying false information, rather than educating about real needs that had not been previously envisaged. They point out the dangers of materialism, excessive consumption, ostentation and luxury; while economic liberals like to show how marketing can persuade people to brush their teeth, floss etc., have cleaner and more attractive homes, better education, in other words take steps that most hold to be generally desirable.

Both these world views, the progressivist planning utopia as well as the conservative retrospective utopia have at their center the belief that there is some sophisticated institutional design (in one case, the result of deliberation; in the other, of tradition) that can produce stability and order, and that they will work through a high degree of compulsion.

The unique feature of the human position – and an essential aspect of the dignified nature of man – is that compassion, and also love, cannot be compelled. Compassion involves the emotional ability to put oneself in someone else's position: to make the imaginative leap that is needed to generate a Kantian code of ethic. Love means going much further, and forgetting or abandoning the idea of a separate self, as the sense of being a separate individual is lost in a contemplation of a common bond with the other.

These sentiments of compassion and love must come from within, not be a product of external laws. John Henry Newman provided a beautiful depiction of how persuasion to the truth should work, in a sermon in which he contrasted the fiery denunciations of Savanarola (for whom he nevertheless had much sympathy) with the quiet persistence of St. Philip Neri. As Newman put it: 'the Almighty displayed His presence to Elias on Mount Horeb. "The Lord was not in the

wind," nor "in the earthquake," nor "in the fire"; but after the fire came "the whisper of a gentle air."'Or, in one of his most famous hymns, "the still small voice." [8]

Newman's insight gives us a powerful tool to reach a judgment on the extent to which religions and their practitioners accord with the most basic or intrinsic orientation of humanity. False religions have the fire and the earthquake in large measure, but lack entirely the still small voice. When the fire and the earthquake pose a danger to humanity, there is no case for the toleration of such religions. But this is not a common case. Far more frequent are the occasions when false practitioners of true religions come with the fire and the earthquake. A liberal society then has the challenge of working out how these people can be brought to a closer recognition of the truth. Prohibition and the violent suppression of expressions of faith are only likely to lead to a destructive cycle of disenchantment.

V

Only a comprehensive approach in which we recognize the limits of external discipline and the importance of the inner conviction can usefully illuminate the discussion of the great social issues of our age. The best-selling book of Thomas Piketty has dramatically drawn attention to the rise of inequality. A consequence as well as a cause of that inequality is that it becomes more difficult for us to be compassionate or to realize caritas. Pope Francis rightly condemns the "globalization of indifference."[9]

The causes of the relatively recent rise in inequalities in almost every industrial society despite tax systems that aim at redistribution are complex: but they include inadequate innovation (which tends to privilege inherited wealth positions) as well as policies which accidentally or inadvertently increase inequality (as both monetary and fiscal policies followed after the Great Recession have done). An important driver is also the disintegration of traditional families and the erosion of marriage in poorer households, giving rise to a cycle of underachievement and deprivation. That social disintegration is harder to deal with through conventional policy mechanisms. Inequality, surprisingly, has not been well addressed by attempts to counteract it through fiscal policy. Economic dynamism and a generally more certain and hence better policy can make for a society that tends less to an inequality that makes it harder to realize our basic human attributes.

The dynamics of interactions with others – unlike state compulsion – do not force us to be better. They rather inspire us to accommodate, adjust to, interact with, and yes, even slightly change, a whole world around us. What ultimately is the source of that inspiration? We might – indeed we should – like to think that it is the same God that the logic of disenchantment has been pushing out of public debate.

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[8] John Henry Newman, *Sermons Preached Upon Various Occasions*, London: Burns and Oates, 1881, p. 218.

[9] Thomas Piketty, *Capital*, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014; http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/08/pope-globalisation-of-indifference-lampedusa .