

The Religion of Rights.

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European civilisation is marked through and through by Christ's two commandments, to love God entirely and to love your neighbour as yourself. Europeans have cherished the Prayer that asks God to 'forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those that trespass against us'. Forgiveness and confession are cornerstones of the Christian edifice. But there is another cornerstone too, and that is the idea of natural law, inherited by Christianity from the Romans, and ultimately from the stoics of ancient Greece. Natural law connotes the obligations intrinsic to a free and self-governing life. And on the three cornerstones of confession, forgiveness and natural law has been built the great edifice that distinguishes European civilisation from all others in recorded history, which is the belief in the sanctity of the individual. Whatever the powers that govern us, we believe, it is the free and sovereign individual who provides the ultimate test of their legitimacy.

The European Institutions have tried to retain this idea, while removing all reference to the Christian religion from their official documents. After all, European society contains people of all faiths and none, and to emphasise the Christian legacy would be to discriminate against those who reject its doctrines. But the Institutions go further than not mentioning the Christian faith; they ostentatiously discard its teachings, whenever fashion conflicts with them. Members of the European Parliament are pressing for both gay marriage and abortion to be included in the list of human rights, while the European Fundamental Rights Agency,

established to define and protect the rights of European citizens, is actively expanding the list of rights to include everything on the radical feminist and LGBT agenda. Whatever the cause of these developments, there is no doubt as to the effect. European society is rapidly jettisoning its Christian heritage and has found nothing to put in the place of it save the religion of 'human rights'.

I call this a religion, because it is designed to fill the hole in people's worldview that is left when religion is taken away. The notion of a human right is offered as a ground for moral opinions, for legal precepts, and for policies designed to establish order in places where people are in competition and conflict. But it has been severed from its foundations in the old idea of natural law. Hence if you ask what rights are human or fundamental you get a different answer depending whom you ask, and nobody seems to agree with anyone else regarding the procedure for resolving conflicts. Consider the dispute over marriage. Is it a right or not? If so, what does it permit? Does it grant a right to marry a partner of the same sex? And if yes, does it also permit incestuous and polyandrous marriage too? Without some idea of natural law nobody knows how to settle such questions, except by summoning their own private opinion.

Things are made more complex still by the inclusion, in all European provisions, of 'non-discrimination' as a human right. When offering a contract of employment, a place in a college or a bed in a hospital you are commanded not to discriminate on grounds of race, ethnic group, religion, gender, sexual orientation and so on. But all coherent societies are based on discrimination – a society is an 'in-group', however large and however hospitable it may be. Non-discrimination laws effectively tie the hands of the indigenous European communities, forbidding them from offering privileges to their existing members. Meanwhile discrimination practised by the incoming migrants goes officially unremarked.

For according to the religion of human rights, immigrant communities are potential victims of the majority culture, and the religion of human rights is about siding with the victim. Hence immigrants who discriminate in favour of their own religious or ethnic group are largely protected from the anti-discrimination laws that the rest of us must be careful to obey. As a result European cities are increasingly places of tightly knit immigrant communities with fiercely defended territory, from which the indigenous inhabitants are excluded. If you doubt that, have a look at Bradford, St Denis or Rotterdam, enclaves protected by the religion of human rights, within which, however, human rights – the rights of women especially – are widely disregarded.

Like other religions, the religion of human rights favours orthodoxy over truth, whenever the two compete. Thus, the truth that men and women are biologically different has collided with the orthodoxy that equal rights means equal outcomes. For the religion of rights the fact that a technology firm employs more men than women at the higher level is proof

of discrimination. Even to have a different view in this matter is a sacking offence, as we have seen from the recent case at Google. And when it comes to the truth about the exploitation of vulnerable English girls by some Muslim men, best not to mention it. For in this case truth means Islamophobia, and Islamophobia is a violation of human rights.

To put it simply, the old religion of Europe is being replaced by a dubious and mystical substitute. Nor is it the first time that this has happened. The French Revolution began with a Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, which purported to sweep away all the old religious and customary loyalties in order to raise the free individual above those who wished to govern him. Sceptics who suggested that the declaration of rights ought to be followed by a declaration of duties were pooh-poohed by the revolutionaries, who insisted that citizens would not need to be reminded of what they owed to their fellows. Within four years of the declaration French citizens were being guillotined at the rate of 3,000 a month, the prisons contained half a million people, and the revolutionary tribunals issued sentences of death and imprisonment without granting a right to answer the charge. No one was free to practise their religion, and priests had to swear allegiance to the revolution or else go in fear for their lives.

Of course the modern version is a great improvement on that first attempt. The framers of the European convention on human rights were familiar with the true origin of the human rights idea, in the Christian conception of natural law. They knew that impartial judges, the right of defence and the presumption of innocence must all be part of the deal. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to ask ourselves whether we are really entitled to hand over the government of a modern society to courts that grant unconditional and universal rights without specifying the duties needed to pay for them. For rights are privileges, which favour the person who can claim them, regardless of the moral reasons for opposing the claim. Hence they inevitably deliver one-sided solutions, whatever common sense may say.

Recent cases illustrate the problem. In the last decade a great many criminals, including rapists and murderers, have been able to avoid deportation from our country, on the grounds that this would infringe their human rights, notably their right to a family life: even if such a right exists, it is surely the case that a murderer or a rapist has forfeited it.

A similar misapplication of the concept is illustrated by the quandary faced by adoption agencies. Nobody has a right to adopt a child, though agencies have a duty to find suitable parents for the children in their care. It is argued, however, that gay parents have the same right to adopt children as any heterosexual couple, and therefore that no adoption agency can discriminate against same-sex couples who apply to be adoptive parents. A complex moral question, concerning the welfare of children and the duties of their guardians, is surrendered to the human rights idea, and all competing duties are disregarded. Just as activists are pressing for a right

to abortion that takes no notice of the unborn child, so is there now a right to adopt that overrides whatever duties have been undertaken by the agencies responsible for a child's future welfare. Once again, if you can claim something as a right, no reasoned argument can oppose you.

It is not only Christians who are at odds with this new religion; so too are Muslims. In everything to do with sex, marriage and the family the faithful Muslim looks for duties, not rights. The human rights idea privileges the living over the unborn, and sees submission to the will of God as valid only if it amounts to doing your own thing. Such an idea has no moral purchase over the Muslim heart. Yet it is the only moral idea on offer. No wonder that young Muslims turn from it.

I see no alternative other than to recover the real source of our rights and duties, in the Christian discipline of neighbour-love, and its three cornerstones of confession, forgiveness and natural law. This is what our culture teaches us, and what the jihadists also need to understand. It will require courage and a measure of defiance to exalt this moral legacy above the growing list of phoney human rights, and to confront our citizens with the cultural and personal truth of it. But why not give it a try? That is what it means, to love your neighbour as yourself.