**The foundations of goodness**

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**Can one be morally virtuous without also being religiously observant?**

WITH Christmas approaching, this week seems about as good as any to reflect on our spiritual values. Not that Christmas these days has much religiosity about it.

Christians and non-Christians alike will acknowledge that the festival is as much a consumer's holiday as an occasion for holy observance. A merry Christmas? Well, that depends on whether you can afford to splurge on that plasma-screen television.

The evolution of Christmas into a shameless exercise of material consumption is symptomatic, many would say, of society losing its moral compass.

As philosopher Charles Taylor has observed, the latter half of the 20th century saw the rise in Western societies of a culture of expressive authenticity.

People are encouraged to find their own way and "do their own thing". Individualistic excess has coarsened our moral sensibilities.

According to Taylor, it is secular disenchantment that is at the root of this atomised individualism. The result has been a weakened connection between the pursuit of a moral or spiritual path and the belonging one has to larger ethical communities such as political states, nations and religions.

But is a lack of religious belief really to blame for such social ills? Must we regard secularism as a moral threat?

We have come a long way from the days of the Spanish Inquisition when atheists would be met with gruesome flaming deaths at the stake. Although the notion may appeal to some, we should avoid believing that religious belief, in and of itself, amounts to moral virtue. There are murderers who believe in God or who believe they are doing his work just as there are atheists who do good.

Moral goodness isn't about whether you believe in a supreme being or subscribe to an official doctrine of morality; it is ultimately about how you conduct yourself towards others.

Having said that, any coherent ethical framework cannot exist in a philosophical vacuum.

This is because moral virtue can be understood only as part of some practice: some set of customs, maxims and principles; some measure of excellence drawn from a historical tradition.

So at one level, it makes no sense to say that someone is simply ethical or moral.

We can make judgments only about what is ethical or moral from within a conception of the good life.

Consider something as morally uncontroversial as the act of helping others.

Such a thing cannot be separated from our understanding of it as an act of charity before God, as an act that contributes to good karma, or as part of one's expression of civic or human solidarity with others. Even the simplest of good acts brings into play a series of ethical assumptions.

It is understandable, then, that many associate an absence of religious belief with moral drift. Yet this is ultimately mistaken; we needn't assume that moral goodness requires a singular religious tradition as a source.

It seems more true to say that in a pluralistic world we are all increasingly capable of drawing on the best of different traditions, whether they are religious, cultural or intellectual.

On that note, I bid all readers merry Christmas, happy Hanukkah and season's greetings.

*Readers are invited to suggest subjects for future pondering. The email address:* *philosophercolumn@gmail.com*

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