



1-1-2012

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Recommended Citation

John E. Coons, *Good Selves and Just Wars*, 19 NOTRE DAME J.L. ETHICS & PUB. POL'Y 71 (2005).

Available at: <http://scholarship.law.nd.edu/ndjlepp/vol19/iss1/4>

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GOOD SELVES AND JUST WARS

JOHN E. COONS*

It is impossible to live in peace with people one believes to be damned

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau

INTRODUCTION

Rousseau means that my neighbor is my enemy, if (1) my own version of the true and the good is necessary to salvation; and (2) he or she is an unbeliever.¹

The idea that persons are saved or damned by the truth of their beliefs and the correctness of their deeds has counted in human affairs at least since Moses gave the idolaters what he thought they deserved. It surprises me, then, that commentators on today's "clash of civilizations" have so little to say about those theories of individual perfection, whether natural or supernatural, that are specific to the three principal combatants—Secularism, Judeo-Christianity, and Islam. Certainly, Rousseau would have asked whether, in their contemporary forms, each or any of these dominating world views, or their branches, allows any hope for those who profess either of the other two.² While they persist in their evident errors, are my misguided neighbors condemned to forfeit the human ideal? Or, is there room in my own creed for the proposition that, somehow, all three of us have fullest access to the highest sort of perfection?

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1. The passage continues: "[T]o love them would be to hate God who punishes them: it is absolutely necessary either to convert or to torment them." JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU, *On Social Contract*, in ROUSSEAU'S POLITICAL WRITINGS 172 (Julia Conaway Bondanella trans., 1988). Rousseau's specific villain in this passage is his version of Roman Christianity; for reasons set out in the text below, I label this interpretation "gnostic." See *infra* text accompanying notes 9–18.

2. Rousseau observed that, in his own day, religious aggression was "less apparent among the Moslems." ROUSSEAU, *supra* note 1, at 168. Further, "Mohammed had very sound views . . . but the division began again . . . especially in the sect of Ali." *Id.* Rousseau did not link the degrees of religious xenophobia to any specific Islamic conceptions of the conditions of salvation. *Id.*

Shortly, I will identify certain plausible premises about God and human nature that would justify such an irenic concept. Together they would constitute not only a theory of the self but also of the two distinct categories of good that are unique to the human person. I will argue that belief in this cluster of premises about the self and human goods is a response—perhaps the only one—to Rousseau’s mournful assessment of relations between the saved and damned. We can respect his warning while rejecting any solution, including his own, that would either relativize what is truth and correct conduct or weaken our duty to seek them. Given these premises the short, sufficient (and I think true) answer to Rousseau comes in this form: false ideas do not *in themselves* diminish anyone’s goodness, nor can we know from beliefs, or even conduct, who is damned and saved. Any perception of our neighbor’s impending damnation, thus, disappears as a justification for our aggression, and we can dispose of Rousseau’s problem without giving up on the true and the good, as Rousseau chose to do.³ Allow me a half dozen difficult paragraphs to lay the ground and the vocabulary for that claim.

I. THE SELF AND THE GOOD

I begin with two propositions about the self and the two distinct goods that are its object. Proposition 1: the self is best understood as the *capacity* of the whole person freely to shoulder or shirk the one responsibility that is evident to all rational humans—namely, the duty to seek truth and correct conduct. Proposition 2: when the self commits to this search, it realizes its own excellence, regardless of honest mistakes of belief or behavior; fallibility is no threat to its perfection. This self-fulfillment I call “first good”⁴ or, simply, *goodness*. In *By Nature Equal*, Patrick Brennan and I argued that it is the one secure opportunity of every human person.⁵ Later, I suggest an implication of this belief for our relation to Islam.

There are, of course, many goods beside “first good” (or goodness). Some of these we share with the animals or even with all forms of being, while others are unique to humans. As with the goodness of the self, those goods that are special to humanity

3. This is my interpretation of Rousseau’s elevation of the General Will. It might be challenged by the red-blooded relativist, if such there be. See AMY GUTMANN, *DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION* 19–28 (Princeton University Press 1999) (1987).

4. I first used this term in John E. Coons, *A Grammar of the Self*, *FIRST THINGS*, Jan. 2003, at 37.

5. See JOHN E. COONS & PATRICK M. BRENNAN, *BY NATURE EQUAL: THE ANATOMY OF A WESTERN INSIGHT* (1999).

are moral in character and presuppose freedom. The manner of their being is metaphysically odd. They consist in correct possibilities that might be made actual by the thought, choice, and conduct of individuals; it is our duty to try to identify and realize them. These correct possibilities, in some cases, are very specific: I should rescue this child, if I can. Or they may be very general: by education and practice, I should constantly try to strengthen my own intellectual power to discern the right course.

The actual content of the correct possibilities—the object of our specific judgments—changes with the circumstances; for example, the child gets rescued by another person and my responsibility ceases. This inevitable flux of things makes goods of this second sort potentially infinite in number. Further, their realization is contingent; regardless of best efforts, we cannot guarantee that we will achieve, or even recognize, the correct result, either for ourselves or others. Finally, when we do realize such a good, it remains vulnerable to change. I use the term “second goods” for all these important and real (but fickle) possibilities of truth and correct conduct. They are quite distinct from first good, or goodness, which is the perfection that is specific to the self and which is accomplished simply by the self’s free submission to the duty to seek second good; unlike second good, goodness remains invulnerable to all but the self’s own choice to abandon this responsibility to seek.⁶

I need yet a third word for all those aspects of the person that together determine and limit his or her practical ability to discover and realize second good in specific cases. It will be the task of this word to denote the present agglomeration of whatever in me is contingent, whether my thoughts, body, memories, perceptions, or relations with others. For this aggregation of mutable properties, I prefer the term “persona,” intending it to mean the whole of one’s powers (and their limitations) *other than* that unique capacity for goodness which is the self. The persona thus constitutes the tools that are available at any given moment to one who is in search of correct possibilities; it is the instrument that the responsible self assigns to seek and attempt second good.⁷

6. Note that the perfection of the self occurs simply in its commitment to seek and not in any transformation of what is wrong conduct into right. The latter view—that right intention turns the moral frog into a prince—seems implied in JAMES F. KEENAN, S.J., *GOODNESS AND RIGHTNESS IN THOMAS AQUINAS’S SUMMA THEOLOGIAE* (1992), which provides an ample bibliography of this school.

7. For a fuller elaboration of this usage—of person, self, and persona—see Coons, *supra* note 4.

Because all these resources that make up the persona differ greatly from person to person, we are unequal in our access to truth and correctness. This inequality has consequences in the search for “second goods.” For example, regarding the specific requirements of justice, in various circumstances, some of us, and not others, will mistake those occasions when the taking of human life is permissible. But this inequality in our individual powers of discernment is irrelevant to the achievement of “first good,” for the self wins its own goodness simply by committing. That is, it sets the resources of its imperfect persona—such as they are—in diligent quest of justice and truth, however elusive these prove to be to this particular person in this particular case. The individual freedom to commit is common to all rational persons; it ensures a natural equality in our access to goodness, though clearly not in our ability to discover and realize specific second goods.

This, then, is the core idea and the premises on which it rests. Now again, the question: If one were to believe this proposition about the equality of our access to goodness, and I do, would it address Rousseau’s problem? Would it affect one’s treatment of others, including choices of war and peace? I claim this much: the possibility of empathy for the other is deeply affected by the operating assumption that one adopts about the other’s capacity for goodness. That assumption, whatever it is, becomes part of the moral chemistry of each practical encounter. A disposition to doubt the other’s potential for first good—his capacity for simple goodness—undermines the shared dignity of persons and even nations, as they struggle to resolve their inevitable conflicts. Both rationality and charity are the worse for that doubt. In this respect, I cannot improve on Rousseau’s insight, and the current stare-down between Islam and the West can be attributed in part to reciprocal images of damnation—spiritual and material—playing themselves out in politics. Today, that cosmic face-off provides the deadliest opportunity for this subtle provocation that poisons human affairs.

My conclusion is moderately hopeful. Over time, it is conceivable that these disabling interpretations of one another’s potential for goodness can be abandoned without threat to basic beliefs of mainline Christians and Muslims (the secular creed, we will see, is less promising). Without risk of heresy, each may be able to affirm the claim that every human has plenary access to self-perfection (natural and supernatural); such an agreement would deserve propagation. Even universal consensus on the point would not guarantee continual peace; agreement about our common capacity for goodness would not determine the

proper disposition of the Golan Heights. But deliverance from Rousseau's specific threat would help to limit armed conflict to that elusive occasion known as "just war." Neither Islam nor the West yet seems fully conscious of the grave consequences of denying the highest human achievement to honest, striving persons who get wrong answers.

II. THE Gnostic TEMPTATION

Though the more radical elements of Islam may be deaf to arguments that might heal and bind, fellowship with the Muslim-in-the-street is a legitimate, if long-range, hope for the West. Moral and intellectual schemes abound that could accelerate its coming. Each of these proposals begins with a somewhat different diagnosis of our mutual and enduring discontent.⁸ The problem can seem to lie with them or us. It is our arrogance or their envy; it is their theology or our materialism; it is their repression of women or our repression of nothing at all. Doubtless it is all these and more, but I wonder that our reciprocal phobias may issue, in telling measure, from a blind spot that we and the Muslims share in varying degree with the rest of the race. I hesitate to label this imperfection "natural"; for, in principle, it may be overcome and, in practice, it appears to be shrinking, at least among religious believers. It consists, I think, in a certain form of Gnosticism—that ancient and fuzzy term that I will now refocus for our immediate purpose.⁹

For me, the gnostic is that person, fingered by Rousseau, who presumes a link between correct knowledge and self-perfection. Like most of us, the gnostic believes that he knows some particular set of truths, descriptive and/or moral. What sets him apart is his belief that the knowledge of his specific truths is important or even necessary to the achievement of the highest state of being that is possible to the human individual. Gnostics do not constitute a harmonious whole—anything but. Daily we

8. The report of the 9/11 Commission gives an excellent theological, cultural, economic, and historic description of the problem. See NAT'L COMM'N ON TERRORIST ATTACKS UPON THE U.S., *THE 9/11 COMMISSION REPORT* 48–55 (2004). Even its account of the theological background, however, is silent on Rousseau's warning of the implications of human contempt for those damned by their erroneous convictions.

9. Scholars of Antiquity will squirm; however, the parochial phenomenon that they label "Gnostic" constituted but one historical example of the enduring tendency to understand human perfection as, first of all, an intellectual state. See generally ELAINE PAGELS, *THE Gnostic GOSPELS* (1979) (comparing mainstream orthodox Christianity with Gnosticism). The uncapitalized form of the word is extremely useful to identify the outlook common to schools of moral thought that otherwise appear to share nothing.

see them strongly disagree regarding two things: (1) the content of the precious knowledge; and (2) the nature of the personal excellence for which this knowledge is the ideal instrument. Conceptions of what it is to be self-fulfilled (states of being that are analogous to my "first good" or goodness) can be either natural, supernatural, ambiguous, or all three; the same holds for the knowledge that is necessary to secure that highest state. Thus, for example, a religious gnostic may deem his particular theological insight essential to a perfection that, when achieved by any person, consists specifically in his justification and eternal salvation.¹⁰ The secular gnostic, by contrast, may recognize a very different form of self-perfection, one to which any belief in God is a serious impediment.¹¹ But all gnostics agree on this: no matter how one conceives this state of excellence, getting wrong information is an impediment to its realization.

I will comment first on those gnostic conceptions of excellence that are exclusively secular. These tend to share an understanding of the self that is purely materialistic. We are "nothing but" our bodies, and mental activity proceeds essentially in the manner of a computer. For such believers, the "gnosis" consists in one's grasping this deterministic reality. Given this insight, individual perfection may then be conceived simply as a state of maximized neural pleasure; or this sensual aspiration may be integrated with, and often is subordinated to, a specifically intellectual component of the human experience. The latter outlook is typical in the culture of our schools and colleges where an individual's fulfillment often is taken to consist essentially in secular enlightenment advanced to the limit of one's natural capacity. Academics of this mind may represent the purest of all gnostic types, favoring Einstein T-shirts and worshipping an intellect that

10. On the primacy of intellect and right answers in Calvin's corpus, see WILLIAM J. BOUWSMA, JOHN CALVIN 98-109 (1988). According to KEENAN, *supra* note 6, at 53-56, Aquinas was more wavering than Calvin and on his way toward a non-gnostic finale. He never reached it. See ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, SUMMA THEOLOGIAE, I-II, q. 9, art. 6, obj. 3 (Fathers of the English Dominican Province trans., Benzinger Brothers 1947).

11. See, e.g., JOHN R. SEARLE, THE REDISCOVERY OF THE MIND 90-91 (1992) ("When we encounter people who claim to believe such things, we may envy them the comfort and security they claim to derive from these beliefs, but at bottom we remain convinced that either they have not heard the news or they are in the grip of faith."). See also JOSEPH VINING, THE SONG SPARROW AND THE CHILD 9 (2004) ("Biology has demonstrated that there is no metaphysical entity hidden behind the word 'life' . . .") (quoting Nobelist Francois Jacob). Regarding theories of morality, Jean-Pierre Changeux (another Nobelist) assures us that "[t]ogether they make up a virtual symphony of blindness . . ." *Id.* at 53.

is strictly empirical. Single-mindedly, they struggle to raise the academic performance of unpromising students, exulting at each improbable success and despairing over the intellectual under-achiever whose ignorance forfeits his own highest possibility.

Worse, if our gnostic academic cares about human equality, as is common, she is dismayed at the inevitable hierarchy of persons that is entailed in her own world view; for her, the immense natural differences in intellectual power among her students represent the limits of their attainable perfection.¹² In her eyes, the real human victory occurs only in the brain; the brightest are the best, and the "beautiful mind" is the one that wields the highest intellectual horsepower.¹³ My late colleague, Bernard Williams, liked to call this aspect of the human condition "moral luck."¹⁴ By randomly distributing the capacity for gnostic excellence, it entails the death of human equality.

Meanwhile, far from California, on some sunny street in Islamabad, a young Muslim reflects on the destiny of Westerners like these secular friends of mine. He knows well the sacred truths of belief and conduct that are necessary and sufficient for salvation. He does not anticipate sharing paradise with infidel Berkeley professors. These may, however, serve to remind him that a prominent part of the Muslim's own saving knowledge consists in the duty of concern for the salvation of those who are endangered by wrong ideas.¹⁵ Paradoxically, he mirrors the missionary zeal of our typical Western academic; for each of them longs to infuse what are the saving ideas in the world's wasted minds. Generously, the secularist and the Muslim yearn to render one another knowing and thus perfectible—each on his own gnostic terms.

12. See BERNARD WILLIAMS, *The Idea of Equality*, in *PROBLEMS OF THE SELF* 230, 234–39 (1973).

13. The recent Hollywood film of this title is a celebration of this secular mystique of intellect-as-perfection. The *brain* of the film's protagonist is, indeed, high octane; but to adjudge the *mind* that it served "beautiful" is, in my view, a case of serious mislabeling.

14. Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck*, in *MORAL LUCK* 35, 36 (Daniel Statman ed., SUNY Press 1993).

15. See KORAN 31 (N.J. Dawood trans., Penguin Books 1956) ("Therefore give warning. Your duty is only to warn them . . . As for those who turn their backs and disbelieve, Allah will inflict on them the supreme chastisement."); see also *id.* at 317 ("Tell the unbelievers that if they mend their ways their past shall be forgiven; but if they persist in sin, let them reflect upon the fate of their forefathers. Make war on them until idolatry is no more and Allah's religion reigns supreme."). Before plunging into the Koran, I recommend Tolstoy's classic fictional interpretation of Muslim worldviews. LEO TOLSTOY, *Hadji Murad*, in *GREAT SHORT WORKS OF LEO TOLSTOY* 547 (Louise Maude & Aylmer Maude trans., Harper & Row 1967).

The gallery of religious gnostic creeds is considerable. I cannot identify every specimen. It is sufficient to note those modalities of Christianity whose beliefs limit the hope for goodness, either of the Muslim or of the secular-minded person. Consider this line from Aquinas: "[T]he will that abides by that erring reason is evil [in a certain case]; since this error arises from ignorance of the Divine Law, which he is bound to know."¹⁶ Let me stress that Aquinas was the most moderate of gnostics, clearly preferring to excuse and save the ignorant and the blundering where possible. But one must recognize in him this enduring tendency, shared by a substantial number of other Christians, to suppose that either natural perfection or eternal salvation, or both, turns upon one's holding correct beliefs and/or doing correct deeds.¹⁷ Half consciously such Christians ratify Samuel Johnson's notion of a hell paved with good intentions. Paradise, they insist, depends on right answers; anyone who misjudges the evil of polygamy, assisted suicide, or an unjust war faces grievous consequences.

Christians who insist in this way that correctness is a condition of goodness are, in my terms, gnostics. But note that, in respect of their own personal prospects, this is a neutral observation; so far as I am concerned, the honest gnostic (of every stripe) is as salvageable as the rest of us blunderers. God has shown him, and all of us, the responsibility to seek, leaving him free either to accept or evade it. I do wish he would get the right answer about who is good, but, if he is truly seeking, the gnostic paradoxically achieves goodness in the very manner that he is unable to recognize as effectual for his opponent.

III. COSTS OF GNOSTICISM

Now consider more specifically the practical effect of supposing in this way that the other's access to goodness is impeded by incurable ignorance. To the extent that our trio of Gnostics—the godless, the Christian, and the Muslim—reciprocally devalue one another for honest mistakes of belief and behavior, they ratify General Sheridan's notorious assessment of the American

16. See AQUINAS, *supra* note 10, q. 19, art. 6; see also KEENAN, *supra* note 6.

17. An oblique window on modern attitudes among various Christian churches is the excellent volume *SHARING THE BOOK: RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES ON THE RIGHTS AND WRONGS OF PROSELYTISM* (John Witte, Jr. & Richard C. Martin eds., Orbis Books 1999). The most pointed among its essays is Jozef Tomko's *Missionary Challenges to the Theory of Salvation*. *Id.* at 174. For one who was weaned on "The Jesuit Relations" and who saved nickels to "save" pagan babies, the authors of the other essays in this book show surprisingly little interest in eschatology.

Indian.¹⁸ We can almost substitute Usama bin Laden for Sheridan. To be sure, the Wahabi fanatic would deny that dead Christians are good; but the observation that live ones are bad would be self-evident.

And, if the American Indian and I were really bad, what would follow? I fear that the practical policies favored by Sheridan and al Qaeda would make a certain sense. If my blundering conduct or false belief entails my self-corruption, why should anyone accord me the deference due the man who has been made good by grasping the right ideas? Now, just how far one should go in disadvantaging any specific bad man may be a matter for casuistry and prudence, and mercy is allowed. But in principle, the personal state of any of us would seem highly relevant to the distribution of rewards and burdens. Rousseau got this much right. Whether in war or peace, unless some non-gnostic and sovereign principle enters to mediate our judgments, any man's shortfall in belief or conduct—hence, in his goodness—will bear upon the treatment due him. For better or worse, the untethered notion that there is a roster of the damned who are identified by their deeds or ideas is potentially lethal. Plausibly, the bad X deserves to be a dead X.

Again, this is not a problem peculiar to those gnostics who also happen to be either Muslim fanatics or crackpot American generals. Marxists, liberals, and Christians have all been known to discover persons whose failure to know what is true and good merits disadvantage. The appropriate sanction need not be governmental or military and can be subtle indeed. In American society, the correct secular liberal denounces and publicly shuns the fundamentalist Christian believer, who often returns the compliment. Even when chance throws them on the same side of some policy, they manage to devalue one another as embodiments of moral failure. The consequences for each and for society of this mutual contempt are not trivial. And these effects get extended as secular and Christian gnostics turn independently to assess the Muslim; though human, this barbarian is, by definition, an inferior specimen.¹⁹ To the secular, this is an easy inference from the Muslim's supposed ignorance and fear of

18. To be fair, the remark is only "attributed." OXFORD DICTIONARY OF QUOTATIONS 499 (2d ed. 1955).

19. JOHN L. ESPOSITO, *THE ISLAMIC THREAT: MYTH OR REALITY?* 51 (3d ed. 1999) ("Muslims did not have to look far to find Europeans whose statements reinforced their fears; said one English author: 'The luxuriant religions of Asia shrivel into dry sticks when brought into contact with the icy realities of Western sciences.'").

modernist culture;²⁰ for the gnostic Christian the dismal assessment tends to be more specifically theological.²¹ Meanwhile, returning these volleys, the Muslim gnostic sees them both as losers.²² Though the process is subtle and almost pre-conscious, for all three believers, their exclusivist creeds can be predisposing when it comes time to decide between war and peace. It is easier to bomb the damned.

IV. THE IRENIC VERSES

This perceptual problem did not begin with our recent rediscovery of Islam. The West has long recognized the gnostic syndrome as a challenge to a peaceful pluralist order and has responded at the level of proverbs, rules of thumb, and policies of avoidance. One of its settled conventions for defusing the incendiary question about goodness is to "treat each person as an individual." Judgments are to be made one by one. To a point this is a useful rule. Without denying the reality of distinctions in perfection that hold among us, it encourages our better angels to focus upon specific facts about a person that truly ought to count for or against goodness. In this way, some characteristics get properly marginalized. For example, race does not seem to bear, hence we reject it along with gender which (pace Aristotle) seems irrelevant to self-perfection.

But, soon we run out of such manifestly neutral categories and can be driven once again to personify the evils of our enemies' beliefs and practices. Even his beliefs about descriptive matters such as the Big Bang or the evolution of species can seem to implicate such a believer's goodness.²³ And whenever a fac-

20. *Id.* at 285–86.

21. I hesitate out of ignorance. Even in the era of the Spanish Inquisition, the mind of Europe seems conflicted about the Muslim's access to God. See HENRY KAMEN, *THE SPANISH INQUISITION* 1–7 (1998). And the Vatican's several modern pronouncements on Catholic-Muslim relations would seem to remove the issue at the official level. See JACQUES JOMIER, *THE BIBLE AND THE QUR'AN* (Edward P. Abetz trans., 2002) (detailing the differences between Christian Scripture and Islamic texts while acknowledging that the Catholic Church's official position focuses on their mutual worship of the same God).

22. See generally Donna E. Artz, *The Treatment of Religious Dissidents Under Classical and Contemporary Islamic Law*, in *RELIGIOUS HUMAN RIGHTS IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE: RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES* 387 (John Witte, Jr. & Johan D. van der Vyver eds., 1996). At least for amateurs like the author, this essay is a rich, clear source with which to start before proceeding to BERNARD LEWIS, *THE MIDDLE EAST: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE LAST 2000 YEARS* (1995) and other Lewis works.

23. For the six-day creationist this may seem obvious. But note that for the determinist himself, it has virtually the same effect by rendering moral "goodness" an illusion but leaving him, nonetheless, with the anomalous virtue of being rid of "prejudices." His is a noble "act of self-discipline . . . by which

tual claim of this sort is offered as the premise for conduct, the stakes tend to rise. Convictions regarding the humanity of the fetus come to mind; if you should propose to practice the evil that your particular factual belief about the unborn would logically allow, my sour judgment of you at the deepest level may seem confirmed. Even though, in the end, I decide to tolerate your favorite sins and false beliefs, my bleak opinion of you—qua you—is hard to shake. If a lightning bolt were to deliver the justice you deserve, I would consider my opinion conveniently vindicated. Thus, for the gnostic to treat another human as an individual does not necessarily eliminate, and can even encourage, conflict.

A second convention urges us to distinguish persons from their acts. This also is good advice. John Paul II invokes it when he defends the integrity of ethics;²⁴ an action can be truly wrong regardless of the actor's benign state of mind. Unfortunately, to distinguish person from act does not settle the question of whether a deed that is truly evil necessarily affects the actor's own goodness. One can accept both the person/act distinction and the objectivity of ethics without deciding whether a man or woman can be self-perfecting when he or she honestly mistakes incorrect for correct acts. The gnostic, in short, can still believe that the earnest but invincibly ignorant actor is personally corrupted (or, at best, unperfected).²⁵

In a pluralist social context discord among gnostics obviously presents a special challenge to the pursuit of community. In modern times the West has responded with a third and broader strategy that is intended to keep the contentious question of individual goodness below the level of collective consciousness. Both formally and informally, society has discouraged religious speech within our common institutions.²⁶ The "naked public square,"²⁷ in considerable degree, has been understood and accepted as a strategy for muzzling discussion; we are to remain mute about both the religious criteria of good-

one tries to eliminate . . . all remaining traces of transcendence" JEAN-PIERRE CHANGEUX & ALAIN CONNES, *CONVERSATIONS ON MIND, MATTER AND MATHEMATICS* 25 (M.B. DeBevoise ed. & trans., 1995).

24. See POPE JOHN PAUL II, *VERITATIS SPLENDOR*, Nos. 62–63 (J. Michael Miller ed., Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division 1996) (1992).

25. Unfortunately, *Veritatis Splendor* can itself be easily misunderstood this way. See *id.* No. 78. For a strong, clear pre-Vatican II statement of the gnostic position, see ETIENNE GILSON, *THE PHILOSOPHY OF ST. BONAVENTURE* 378–79 (1965).

26. See STEPHEN MACEDO, *DIVERSITY AND DISTRUST* 28–43 (2000); GUTMANN, *supra* note 3.

27. RICHARD JOHN NEUHAUS, *THE NAKED PUBLIC SQUARE* (1986).

ness and the competing interpretations of the sort of person these imply. This strategy of silence about the truly good human being has, however, both overdetermined and underdetermined its own pacific objective. To begin, the policy excludes a great deal of speech that is socially benign. Most of the religious ideology of goodness that gets censored is wholly irenic and socially inclusive; indeed, it is both deeply communitarian and anything but gnostic.²⁸

On the other hand, this muzzling of ideas encourages all the forms of gnostic hierarchy that compete with religion. By excluding religious discourse from the public arena society has ensured a virtual monopoly for the secular gospels with their saving message that the highest state that is available to any individual is by its nature purely empirical and sensational. Gone from the debate are any invocations of an order of truly correct conduct (or truths) issuing from an authentic authority to which (or whom) a responsible self might cleave and commit. If one is even permitted to speak of an order of "good" acts, these must be defined in terms of the desires of individuals. Talk of transcendence is out of bounds, leaving no reason other than prudence to honor a purely artificial social contract, even if such a thing could obtain under these intellectual conditions. The notion of a collective good is transmogrified, becoming at best the sum of our unrealized private hankerings. What I have called "second good" becomes whatever I happen to will. And even the "I" who is to do this act of willing loses its identity as a locus of responsibility. Paradoxically, this secular dominance is itself anything but neutral, constituting a strong claim of precedence among possible human ends. For example, it implies the puerility of every individual who holds a religious worldview; for, to the secular gnostic, personal goodness consists exclusively in rationality, but the religious believer's rationality is already compromised.

Of course, Rousseau and our contemporary censors have their point. History attests that, when introduced into common affairs, creeds that flaunt the moral superiority of their members tend to generate heat more than light. But the current notion of a strictly secular excellence (with an academic elect) is no exception to this rule; so far this creed has proved not only ineffectual toward its goal of social peace but very costly to both free speech and free religion. In light of this continuing damage, the gag rule increasingly appears narrow and antiquarian (and this not less for its vogue in the academy). In the quest for community

28. See CHARLES L. GLENN, *THE AMBIGUOUS EMBRACE: GOVERNMENT AND FAITH BASED SCHOOLS AND SOCIAL AGENCIES* 62-73 (2000).

today, it is not the secular censor, but the competing religious faiths, that vector toward a shared and irenic orthodoxy; they converge toward the common insight that God will save those who are invincibly ignorant but who do the best they can with what they have been given.²⁹ Now, to the extent that agreement could be reached on this proposition, our disputes over the content of truth and right conduct (even those over our purely material interests) would more likely remain rational and non-violent. It is harder to bomb people who just might be good.

V. CLEARING BRUSH

Renunciation of the gnostic impulse does not come free of cost, but the pain should not be exaggerated. In order to believe in the equality of our access to goodness, one real surrender—and one only—is required. Here is that concession put in its most aggressive form: given certain assumptions about the mind of Mohammed Atta, this terrorist murderer of innocents may have secured his own goodness simply by committing to seek and do the will of Allah as best the diligent Mr. Atta could grasp that will. If you can accept this as a possibility, proceed; the rest of the news is good.

It includes, first, the strict preservation of the truth of “second good” and the traditional conceptions of virtue. The authoritative order of conduct remains intact; no concession is required of any believer either as to its reality or the specific content he ascribes to it. Nor need he doubt the universality of the obligation to seek these correct specifics of which he deems himself steward. In short, the moral status of Mr. Atta’s hideous *deed* is unaffected by conceding the separate possibility of his own goodness.³⁰

A second consolation: the fateful commitment for or against responsibility is never transparent—even to the self that makes it. The human faculty for self-delusion is notorious. It is an occult talent that explains why even the Christian who insists upon *sola fide* (and himself bursts with faith) nevertheless must seek his own salvation “in fear and trembling.”³¹ What seems the direct experience of freely enlisting his own persona in the quest for truth and right conduct can somehow be a deliberate snare laid by the ego—an act of pride and insubordination. Hence, to believe in mankind’s plenary access to goodness does not make life less scary. I suspect that this obscurity about one’s own cho-

29. See COONS & BRENNAN, *supra* note 5, at 145–215.

30. *Id.* Contrast the ambiguity that is allowed by KEENAN, *supra* note 6.

31. *Philippians* 2:12.

sen orientation toward second good is necessary to our freedom, and I report it—at least equivocally—as good news, but the implications multiply.

If I cannot be certain of the authenticity of my own commitment, I can scarcely penetrate Mr. Atta's—or yours. The belief in self-perfection by the commitment to seek "second good," therefore, goes only this far: your natural equipment for goodness is by definition adequate and equal to mine. The integrity of your actual choice remains a mystery.

Does this render our proposition plausible but wholly vapid? How could belief in the capacity for a goodness that is opaque affect how we address the prudential questions of our world? If I must deal only with what I can see of you, what is the practical point about your merely possible goodness? It is this: belief in our common access to an inscrutable goodness denies us General Sheridan's breezy solution to our problems with the neighbors. So long as we can *know* them to be hopelessly evil, we can, without further excuse, turn them into "good Indians." It is when we concede the possibility and mystery of their goodness that we become obliged to undertake a separate accounting of justice. This perfectibility of theirs imposes upon us the responsibility for a moral calculus that includes and assesses every rational consideration about my neighbor *except* his goodness. And this responsibility is universal; it holds for every relationship public and private.

I suppose one might acknowledge a second "loss" to the regenerate gnostic. In making his concession, he declines Sheridan's vivid invitation to serve as the instrument of divine justice here and now. Some might regret this. I intend no sarcasm; one must respect the believer who cannot in conscience forsake what he sees as truth and responsibility. But the die-hard gnostic should in the long run prove rare. He has much to gain by conversion. Embrace of the mystery of a human goodness that is available to all would constitute his liberation from what is a confounding distraction in the pursuit of right answers to practical ethical questions; dealing fairly with a neighbor while convinced of his moral inferiority is a cross like no other. For the sake of sheer intelligibility in ethics one should avoid particular judgments of goodness wherever this is an honest possibility.

This rule has application to political life. To question the goodness of persons is to encumber every step in the pursuit of truth through free expression. Too often social habit encourages a cowardly reticence to face crucial issues lest we betray an offensive and incendiary view of the other; we play possum, and the market of ideas becomes the loser. What a blessing it would

be, then, at last to find that there is in fact no personal offense to be given! To accept the possibility of the goodness of a bungler like me becomes your new liberty to name those ghastly errors of mine without diminishing our common dignity. Indeed, true respect for me requires both that you speak the truth about my mistakes and at the same time do so without impugning my own authenticity. When these two conditions are met, our real disagreement about what is right and just can coexist with the sporting chance of a deeper bond that will outlive the quarrel. Like many Americans I have close friends with really rotten ideas. I am confident of their possible goodness (the friends, not the ideas). It does not follow that we will remain at peace, but, if we must fight, the plausibility of their goodness will be my best hope of our eventual reconciliation.

The achievement of a consensus supporting our universal hope of goodness would not represent anybody's victory in the "culture wars"; it entails no critique of pluralism. What it offers is a moral minimalism that allows the ongoing brawl of ideas; what it makes unacceptable is the stifling of that honorable free-for-all in pursuit of an Ivy League decorum. Short of violence, expression is to be valued and strongly encouraged—even religious expression.

And, as for violence itself, belief in our universal access to goodness is its specific prophylactic. That belief authorizes the pluralist society's one sustainable species of community—the agape that celebrates the potential excellence of all persons even amidst the "war" of ideas. Nothing in it disavows the desirability of a "global ethic" or "common ethical code"—so long as it is the correct one. But as we seek that grand accord regarding the true and the right, let us here and now enjoy our universal access to goodness—and stay alive even as brawling brothers.

VI. WHO COULD BELIEVE THIS?

How open is Muslim doctrine and culture to the premise of an equal opportunity God—one who saves those who do their best, regardless of their errors? My amateur research suggests the absence of any Islamic institution or person that would be authoritative on the question. My own Muslim friends find the idea plausible (and, I suspect, even banal). The professional apologists who bear witness in the media assure us of the Muslim's highest esteem for Christian believers, seeming to imply a positive answer to our question. Still, there remains a very forbidding literature of a militant Islam and a good deal of bloody

history; both may be organically connected to the original revelation and its sufferance of the sword.³²

Overall, my intuition suggests a broad and deep yearning among Muslims for respect and for recognition as full-fledged human persons who, at the same time, remain faithful believers. For them a belief in equal access to goodness offers that very possibility, for it exacts no surrender of anything beyond the particular belief (if such now obtains) that God reprobates souls like me who just cannot get it right. When he hears the news that it is precisely as a Christian that I believe in the Muslim's own plenary access to goodness and to God, perhaps he will return the favor and believe in mine. This modest conversion would be less than a logical entailment; but it is more than a pious hope.

We cannot know until we test the possibility, and the first two questions here may be who are "we," and are we prepared, along with a critical mass of our neighbors, to accept the proposition? So far as the "we" is taken to identify the Christian world, the prospect seems good. Vatican II and most of the encyclicals of John Paul II justify optimism that Catholic doctrine will continue its modern commitment to the full moral dignity of the authentic blunderer.³³ It would be rash to predict the same consensus among Protestants, but I am inclined to hope. After all, salvation by doing our best is moderate doctrine compared to the flirtations with universal salvation that abound in the works of foundational theologians like Karl Barth;³⁴ I might add that those diverse Protestants who populate my own life seem surprised that I would even raise the question.

32. The Koran itself is a rich source of concern. See, e.g., Traditional Chapters 8 ("The Spoils"); 9 ("Repentance"); 83 ("The Unjust"), in KORAN, *supra* note 15. All bristle with injunctions of the following sort from Chapter 9: "[M]ake war on the unbelievers and the hypocrites and deal rigorously with them. Hell shall be their home: an evil fate." *Id.* at 328. Bernard Lewis sums his own view that the Muslim *jihad* is a rather different phenomenon from the crusades with their limited objectives:

The Muslim *jihad* in contrast was perceived as unlimited, as a religious obligation that would continue until all the world had either adopted the Muslim faith or submitted to Muslim rule. In the latter case, those who professed what Muslims recognized as a revealed religion were allowed to continue the practice of that religion, subject to the acceptance of certain fiscal and other disabilities. Those who did not, that is to say idolaters and polytheists, were given the choice of conversion, death or slavery.

LEWIS, *supra* note 22, at 233–34. One finds the irenic messages of our politicians hard to take seriously as informed judgments of the world confronting us.

33. See COONS & BRENNAN, *supra* note 5, at 209–10.

34. *Id.* at 185–90.

Understandably, someone might ask: If, regardless of my errors, I am saved by my free submission to the universal vocation to seek, who needs the Church? In a certain sense the answer is—nobody. No one's access to God is diminished or augmented by the content either of belief or conduct but only by the quality of his or her search.

So, exit the Church? No, and this for reasons that here I can roughly profile, because they seem to me purest orthodoxy. The Church is the world's primary mediator of truth and morals. Now, whether the world will in fact progress in the realization of "second good" is never certain. What is clear is that individually we are supposed to value that progress and to seek it with every instrument at hand—that is, the resources of our own persona. And here stands the Church. It is the authority responsible to discern and offer to each of us the specific content of the truths and right conduct that will tend to the fulfillment of possible human good; to this end it wields revelation, reason, and divine marching orders.

Many will not grasp the Church's message. For some of us this will be because we are busy satisfying ourselves; for others it will be because they have honestly come to suppose truth to lie where it does not. The latter, as authentic seekers, achieve "first good" even as they botch "second good." Having failed with these individuals, the Church, nonetheless, continues to preach, because that is its commission: "Go forth and teach." And we have every reason to hope that the world in fact will be the better for it, though this has nothing specific to do with the salvation of this or that person.

What of the sacraments? Are they inefficacious, because they are not necessary to "first good?" Of course not. (I speak here, I hope, as a Catholic, but that only underlines the point.) The sacraments are exactly what they purport to be; hence they constitute the most powerful possible intervention in our world. They create real relationships, real authority, and real presence. To know them is a great gift and a huge responsibility; but knowledge that this is so does not elevate my prospects for the beatific vision above those of the camel driver. We are full brothers, all the way down in our shared hope for salvation.

Finally, can this anti-gnostic perspective satisfy the Christian emphasis on a divine grace that is freely dispensed? I think it entails the understanding emphasized in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*:

"Grace is . . . a whole economy . . . an economy of love . . . calling for man's free response."³⁵

I can imagine no more thoroughly Christian enterprise than a joint and formal representation by Protestant and Catholic authorities to the following effect: (1) we continue in charity to examine our deep and perhaps irresolvable differences with one another—and all believers—regarding divine truth and right conduct; (2) these differences, however profound, in no way impede our joint and enthusiastic affirmation of the plenary access to the saving love of God of every person who diligently seeks the truth. Presented persistently and artfully to the Islamic world as the reigning Christian consensus, this message carries no obvious downside but only a profound potential for healing. If we believe it, we should say so in common and with enthusiasm.

We cannot, unfortunately, count on the collaboration of our secular brethren who, on this issue, may find themselves tonguetied. Theirs is a gnosticism by its nature more obdurate and perhaps ineluctable. If our highest perfection lies this side of death, it must be measured in things contingent; and these are often the fruit of moral luck. Each of us has more or less of the crucial properties of intellect, health, wealth, looks, and opportunities by which to pursue the ephemera that the secular imperative leaves us to choose for ourselves. Even if this vision somehow could constitute one stable concept of "first good," the chances for each person to realize it would vary dramatically; and, to be plain, under present economic and social conditions, too many Muslims outside the West have come off short in the lottery.

In any case, perfection by simple commitment is not a solution that seems available to our secular colleagues. They cannot value the search for a real and authoritative order of second goods, for *no* such order exists, and if it did, there would be no free self to commit to it.³⁶ To such a mind the believing Muslim must ever appear as a deluded loser. Rev. Falwell and company were not utterly wrong in blaming the terrorist impulse on this sophisticated paganism of the West; for the Muslim clearly apprehends the contempt that it implies for him. The Islamic fanatic

35. E.M. Burke, *Grace*, in 6 NEW CATHOLIC ENCYCLOPEDIA 658, 658–72 (1967).

36. Paradoxically, "[t]here is a denial that we exist . . . and at the same time a hostility to the utterance and the belief that we do exist . . ." VINING, *supra* note 11, at 26. Vining's book presents a treasure of "scientific" denials of the self and of any order of right conduct. For one philosopher's effort to save the extreme Darwinians from themselves, see WILLIAM HASKER, *THE EMERGENT SELF* 75–80 (1999).

is not delivering a justice that in fact is ordained by God, but he is definitely getting even for the insult to Muslim (and human) dignity.

I toast the honest secular gnostic; his access to salvation is exactly my own. I judge only his premises and deeds, never the state of his inscrutable self. Nevertheless, he represents a grave problem for all of us, possibly *the* political problem of our time. Over the century ahead it is his creed that will most systematically imperil human community. The primary barrier to a moral rapprochement with Islam, indeed with the world at large, is not those faiths that anchor confidently in a Father who embraces every struggling bungler. If God wills to save those who seek right answers, all of us can forego our battle with the damned.

