

Faith and Public Reason

Raimond Gaita

If tomorrow evening Stanley Hauerwas speaks the opening words of his fine lecture as they are written in the draft I have seen, he will say, “ I am a Christian. I am even a Christian Theologian”. I am not a Christian. I am not religious. I am not a person of faith, if to be that is to believe in God. I’m not a theologian, or even a philosopher of religion.

I say that I am not religious because I do not believe in a Christian, a Jewish or an Islamic God. I am not a Buddhist. Were I to become religious, I would probably become a Christian, but not because I would have come to believe this or that form of Christianity is the ‘one true faith’. I’m not sure what the phrase means, just as I am not sure what it is to believe in God, what kind of believing religious believing is. Stanley called one of his books *Learning To Speak Christian*. It is a beautiful and profound title. Coming to any of the religions in which prayer plays a defining role is, I suspect, learning to speak that religion – learning to speak Judaism or learning to speak Islam, for example. One can, of course, always learn to speak a new language, but mostly we are at home in our native tongue. We stumble less in it. The religious writers who have affected me deeply are Augustine, Kierkegaard and Simone Weil, though Bach has probably influenced me more than anyone. However I have loved, and lived so long with, my Israeli Jewish wife that my stepdaughters, I am grateful to be able to say, now regard me as an honorary Jew. Conversion to Christianity is therefore unlikely. Given the history of Christian anti-Semitism, I suspect that I could not help seeing it as a betrayal.

Weil speaks to me because she writes with more deeply about affliction than anyone I know, but also without a trace of sentimentality. Compassion for the afflicted, she says, is a greater miracle than walking on water, healing the sick or raising the dead. She has in mind, I think, compassion that recognises the full humanity of the afflicted. Later I will explain what that means. In *Romulus, My Father* I say of my father who went mad and tried to kill himself, Mitru my mother’s lover who killed himself at the age of 27, my mother who also went mad and killed herself on the eve of her 30th birthday, and Vacek, also mad, who lived near us on a hillside between two boulders – that I hoped I could tell the story of their suffering, revealing them to have been broken by it but not thereby diminished. Writing about such things, I listened to Bach to keep me truthful.

Affliction is a large part of my theme this evening.

I don’t want to spend time discussing what the words ‘religion’ and ‘faith’ mean. There is much learned discussion about this, but little agreement, so I don’t feel obliged to defend one account or another or to offer my own. Someone responded angrily to the blurb for this series because, he said, it

betrayed the (common) ignorant assumption that Buddhism is not a religion because it is not theistic. Some people take Buddhism to show that you can be religious without believing in God; others take the fact that Buddhists are not theists as a reason for saying Buddhism is not a religion. That too is not a controversy I want to buy into. I should, however explain why there are no Buddhist speakers in the series. Buddhism has few enemies in Melbourne or amongst most of the people who are now hostile to Islam, Judaism and Christianity – and of course who are hostile to Muslims and Jews, period. When it became clear to me that the focus of this series would be faith and politics, I decided to focus on the religions under attack.

I responded to Weil because, as I said, she writes with such hard-headed compassion for those who suffer severe and ineradicable affliction, especially when it is caused or compounded by the brutality of other human beings. But she frightens me. Stanley Hauerwas has also written wonderfully about affliction. He frightens me too. Their intensity frightens me, though not at all in the way that the intensity of people who are usually called fundamentalists frightens me. Indeed, I invited Stanley to speak partly because he lives his Christianity with such passion. I wanted you to have before you someone whose authoritative witness to what he or she says is undeniable. If you were tone deaf, you might mistake him for a US fundamentalist. In my letter of invitation to him I said that I had thought of titling the series ‘Against Urbanity’. I had in mind the kind of urbanity that condescends to intensity of all kinds, be it religious or ethical, an urbanity that would, as Richard Rorty recommends, make irony the default mode of response to life. Later I will try to explain why Simone Weil and Stanley frighten me.

I don't know what it is to believe in God, but I'm pretty sure of this: anything that seriously calls itself Christian, Judaic or Islamic faith, must believe that it deepens rather than cheapens what human beings care for, whether they are religious or not, or whether they care a fig for religion. We may think they are wrong, of course, but they cannot say: “I know this is sentimental, banal, tone deaf to irony, riddled with cliché, disdainful of the world - but there it is, my religion. I'm not interested in aesthetics. I'm interested in truth”. If that is so, then we must find in our thoughts about religion a space for a conception of the cognitive that enables us to understand what counts as depth and shallowness in the realm of the religious and, indeed, of the ethical more generally. We need it we are to make sense of the distinction between the God of religion and the God of the philosophers. This is especially true of religions like Christianity, Judaism and Islam because they are religions in which reflection on the examples of peoples lives, deeds and words, deepens understanding of what is of religious significance and, indeed, of what it is for something *to be* of religious significance.

To illustrate what I mean, I'll comment on what is often called the problem of evil. For over two thousand years the reality of evil has been presented as though it were, for religious believers, essentially a ‘problem’ about

consistency between three propositions: God is omnipotent and omniscient; God is good; His creation contains much evil. Primo Levi, who wrote with passionate but disciplined constraint about the worst evil known to human kind, said: If God exists, Auschwitz cannot; Auschwitz exists; therefore God does not. This has the form of an argument, but could anyone believe that Levi intended it as one – I mean, intended it as the kind of thing that invites us to examine its premises and the logical relations between them, taking this invitation to assume that both could be developed and/or made tighter, especially by people especially trained to do it - by philosophers or theologians for example? Did Levi intend to give us for contemplation the kind of thing that would make it appropriate – perhaps intellectually mandatory under pain of being insufficiently serious - for him to subscribe to an academically A-listed journal of the philosophy of religion and to read, at least occasionally, some of the many articles on ‘the problem of evil’?

We know that some people came out of Auschwitz with their belief in God intact. Some claimed that it was deepened. They thanked God for the grace that enabled them to retain a sense of His goodness and to worship and praise Him despite what they had seen and suffered. Others – more understandably, to be sure - came out with their faith shattered. Some cursed God. Some thought that to do anything other than to curse him was incoherent and even obscene – the kind of obscenity one finds indeed in the works of writers who, in a spirit of sweet reasonableness, assure us that God will, in His own good time, reveal to those who make it to heaven, the providential role He assigned to Auschwitz. If someone were to ask me, “Who was right – the people who retained their faith or the ones who renounced it?”, I would not say that I do not know in a spirit that assumed that there is an answer to the question, but that I do not have it. Rather, I would say that I do not know what ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ mean in this context. The distance between those who retained their faith in Auschwitz and those who lost it is both distorted and trivialised if one calls it the expression of a disagreement of a kind that could, in principle, be settled one way or the other by people with good and open minds. If that were possible, then we might indeed hope that it will be settled in an academic department, at a writer’s festival, at a dinner party, or even here, this very evening.

It would be a mistake, and a presumptuous one I think, to believe that only those who came out the death camps with their faith shattered fully understood the horrors they had suffered and witnessed - presumptuous in the same way that some pacifists are presumptuous when they say that only they see the true horror of war. There is no non-question-begging, morally and religiously neutral account of what it is really to have understood the full significance of the horrors of Auschwitz that would, necessarily, convict those who retained their faith of being deficient in reason or sensibility, of a failure really to understand what they had seen and suffered. Nor, I think, is there such account of what it means to retain one’s faith while in Auschwitz, one that when it is fully and clearly elaborated should convince those whose faith was

destroyed that their vision of God had been occluded because their faith was too weak.

Now to the distinction I mentioned earlier between the God of the philosophers and the God of religion. The God of the philosophers is a metaphysical entity whose properties, if not His existence, are given to reason conceived as operating best when it is free of the disturbances of practical and affective human living. Propositions about him are, to the extent that is humanly possible, extracted from the natural languages in which they are expressed - languages that are historically deep and resonant with uncontrollable allusions, conditioned through and through by the living, spoken human voice - so that they can be examined by metaphysically inclined philosophers and theologians in a tone-free zone. The God of the philosophers is not a God whose very essence is such that we address him, that we speak or refuse to speak to Him in all the tones and accents of the human voice, a voice conditioned by its vital responsiveness to the many facets of the human condition. The God of religion, on the other hand, is defined by the requirement that belief in Him must deepen our ordinary human understanding of what matters in life. No one can seriously say, 'It is cheap, sentimental, banal and does the dirt on life, but it is my religion and true nonetheless.' The God of religion knows our sins, our joys and our woes, and all that is in our hearts. The omniscient God of the philosophers knows all that and also our email addresses. Those who believe in the God of the philosophers are undeterred by the banality of the latter conception of what it means to say that God knows everything. Banality is not a concept that gets a grip on propositions in a tone-free zone. Nothing in that zone is sentimental, riddled with pathos or tone deaf to irony, not because thought there has reached perfection, but because such categories have no application there. It would be as inappropriate to say that claims about the God of the philosophers, were they to achieve a tone-free status, are banal, or sentimental or tone deaf to irony as it is to say it of propositions in mathematics or physics.

The God who is who is cursed or praised is the God of religion, not because, merely as a matter of psychological fact, we take up such attitudes towards Him, but because, I think, to have such and other attitudes towards Him belongs to our understanding of His nature. With cold, unforgiving anger, Levi cast aside the God of religion. Perhaps he thought differently at the end of his life. But if he did, I could not believe that he did so in the light of a conception of Reason that informs most discussion of the problem of evil.

Reason – especially when it takes a capital 'R' – is a word we should use cautiously. There is a case for saying that there is no such thing. Less provocatively, there is a case for saying that it can only be the name for a capacity to think well or badly. But there is not only one way of thinking well or badly, because what it is to do it will be different according to what one is thinking about. It will be defined by concepts – critical concepts, I have called them - that tell us, for this or that realm of thought and reflection, what it is to

think well or badly and therefore, for this or that realm of thought and reflection, what it is to be legitimately persuaded to believe something. Why not, you may ask, call the forms of that capacity *Reason*? Because, I think, the word has acquired so much philosophical baggage, ethical as well as more narrowly intellectual, that its use cannot be relatively innocent.

Rather than speak of reason, therefore, I would speak of the forms of legitimate and illegitimate persuasion and the conceptions of what it is to try to see things as they are, that partners them.

‘Rational’ is also a seductive word, especially when it is contrasted with ‘emotional’, as a term of criticism. Rationality is an indispensable intellectual virtue – I must emphasise that, in case I am misunderstood as advocating a form of irrationalism. But it is a virtue only when one understands and respects the forms and limits of its application. When one tries to be lucid about one’s mortality or vulnerability to misfortune, for example, one must, of course, try to be rational. But one must also avoid sentimentality, a disposition to pathos and so on as forms of the false that, in these kinds of cases, constantly betray one’s efforts to see things as they are. This richer conception of what lucidity requires marks the limits of the natural application of the concept of rationality. One can, of course, insist that anything that counts as an effort to see things as they are is an exercise of rationality, richly conceived. But that is as unhelpful as saying that when we try to see things as they are we always try to see what is the fact of the matter, albeit according to an enriched conception of the factual.

Sentimentality, to take as one example, sometimes functions as a cause of cognitive failure in much the same ways as overheated anger, or tiredness or drunkenness do. In those cases, the cognitive nature of that failure – its character as something cognitive – can be specified independently of its causes, and indeed independently of the fact that we are vulnerable to such causes, that we are beings who can become angry, sentimental, tired or drunk. Sometimes, however, when we criticise someone’s thought or our own thought for being sentimental, our criticism identifies not a cause of cognitive failure, but a form of it – and when this is the case, it marks a distinctive cognitive realm, a distinctive way in which we have failed to see things as they are and as distinctive concepts of things being as they are. In much of my work I have tried to spell this out in detail. For the moment, let me just say, that distinctive cognitive realm, where there is a distinctive form of understanding, the realm of meaning. In the realm of meaning, form cannot be separated from content, and feeling cannot be separated from thought. It is there that we speak of the understanding that unites head and heart, or sometimes just of the understanding of the heart, meaning that it really is a form of understanding. In the realm of meaning it makes no sense to say, “I don’t care whether some of the beatitudes are sentimental; all that matters to me is whether they are morally true or false”. Or, “I know the this translation of Primo Levi makes him

see sentimental and often banal, but that does not matter. I'm interested in truth, not literature". Almost everything that matters to us occurs there.

This has an implication that many people will find unsettling, because it means that discursive thought that is answerable to the critical categories that define the realm of meaning is more radically in *medias res* than anything suggested by, for example, Wittgensteinian discussions of the way concepts depend on 'forms of life'. Or, to put it another way: the significance of the fact (I take it to be a fact) that what we can think depends on what we can say, will be different according to whether one is thinking about metaphysics or whether one is "learning to speak Christian".

So that I am not misunderstood I want to say emphatically that I believe that we must live our lives with our eyes open; that we owe it to the gift that is our humanity.

Socrates, as I'm sure you know, said at his trial, under sentence of death, that "an unexamined life is not worthy of a human being". If we took 'examination' to mean philosophical examination as he practiced it, then what he said would be absurd and arrogant. But if we take it to mean that a life lived without a concern to be lucid about "about how one should live", as he put it, then I think he is right. And his claim that such a life is not worthy of a human being can be taken to mean, as I suspect he meant it, that a life does not acknowledge the requirement to lucidity is life that does not honour the gift of our humanity, which is never something given once and for all, but something we are always called upon to rise to.

In Plato's dialogue *Phaedo*, Socrates is asked why he is opposed to suicide. He replies, "The allegory which the mystics tell us – that we men are in the world as a soldier is at his guard post, and that one must not release oneself or run away – seems to me a high doctrine with difficult implication". I think that Socrates saw his philosophical life in the same way, as a requirement to be faithful to a love of the world sustained by a gratitude that was not conditional upon how things went for him. He saw suicide (he was, I think, discussing the kind of suicide which Kant characterised, in his *Lectures on Ethics*, as "leaving the world as though it were a smoke-filled room") as both infidelity and ingratitude. I believe that he saw the life that did not struggle against illusion in much the same way. His passionate sense of an obligation to lucidity, which he expressed in his famous remark that an unexamined life was unworthy of a human being, was a form of fidelity and gratitude. It was fidelity to the love that revealed the world to him as his gift.

Socrates' reference to the "allegory which the mystics tell us" might make you suspicious of my development of it. One finds the same kind of connection between the need for lucidity and the love of the world in Albert Camus, who as an avowed, sometimes aggressive, atheist.

Camus is known for making Sisyphus an Existentialist Hero, someone who disdained false hope and false consolation as fiercely as the soldier in the first act of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, who says that he would not give a farthing for the mortal whom false hopes could set afire. *The Myth of Sisyphus* begins with the astonishing claim that "there is only one serious philosophical problem and that is suicide". Even as a young man I believed that was posturing and that muddle followed it. Even so, *The Myth Of Sisyphus* contains something finer than one finds in most of Camus' more clear-headed critics.

To find it at its best, however, the reader should go to the lyrical essays on Algerian cities and on the desert in Oran. Nowhere is Camus' tragic humanism more attractive than in his celebration, in those lyrical essays, of the loves of the young men and women of Algiers. And nowhere is the celebration of their yearning for a happiness whose fulfillment is always short-lived more tenderly qualified by a sense of the tragic – made all the more heartrending by the poetic beauty of its expression.

These essays are marked throughout by an intensity about what it means to live truthfully that now seems alien to us. It would be a mistake to assume that in Camus it is merely another expression of the intensity with which French intellectuals characteristically respond to philosophical questions about meaning, value and purpose. When it is authoritative rather than grandstanding, the intensity of *The Myth of Sisyphus* is the expression of Camus' fearful love of the world – fearful because he is always conscious of the many ways he might be betray it. Camus' need for lucidity (the word appears often in his writings) is not a response to abstract philosophical doubts. It expresses his need to be faithful to his love of the beauty of the world.

As does his rejection of the kind of suicide that was disdainful of the world. Camus writes scornfully against people who turn their back on the world, especially if they would make an aesthetic, a morality or even a philosophy or a religion out of it. Despite his torments, his Sisyphus discovers a joy that is an expression of an unconditional love of the world. Like everything else, this love is vulnerable to misfortune. To think otherwise would be hubris, for at any moment we can lose everything that gives sense to our lives. If it is lucid, an unconditional love of the world must acknowledge that affliction might destroy it. But because severe affliction can destroy everything in person, its power to destroy a person's love of the world does not give one reason to think that the love could not have been unconditional.

* * *

Earlier, I said that Weil frightened me, and that so did Stanley Hauerwas. I want now to explain why I said this, because I suspect that it struck you as baffling. To do so I will discuss an encounter I had with a nun in a psychiatric hospital where I worked in the 1960s, when I was sixteen. I first wrote about her in A

Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice and more recently in *After Romulus*. I was hesitant to talk about her again, but I decided to do so because her example has been fundamental to what I think about the issues before us, and discussion of it enables me to respond to Stanley Hauerwas' response to what I first said about it.

For almost three months I worked in a ward in which some of the patients had been hospitalised for as long as thirty years. Given the medications available at the time, all the patients in that ward were incurable. All were heavily medicated. None had visitors during the time I worked there.

As I remember it, the ward occupied the entirety of a small Victorian building that looked to have been built for the kind of institutional purpose for which it was being used. It seemed even to express Victorian attitudes towards people who were severely mentally ill. Surrounded by white gravel and a high iron fence, it reminded me of some of the enclosures at Melbourne zoo. When patients soiled themselves, as some did often, they were taken to the shower block, ordered to undress, and to stand under the shower, sometimes still wearing their shirts. A member of the nursing staff washed them down, the distance of a mop handle from them, as zookeepers wash down elephants.

The shower routine was symptomatic of the brutish attitude of most of the nurse and psychiatrists towards the patients. We condemn it as, of course, we should, but when we do, we should reflect, I think, on how very hard it is to see as humiliating, behaviour that shows no respect for people who have lost almost all visible signs of dignity. It seems as though there is nothing much to humble. Many people believe that they would prefer to die rather than to be reduced to the condition of those patients. That has become evident in discussion of euthanasia. Even if we disagree with the thought implicit in that preference, namely, that such a life is not worth living, most of us understand why someone might believe it. Many of the nurses and psychiatrists working in that ward probably thought that about the patients in their care. Of course, they could see that the patients were often upset by the way they were treated, but I doubt that they believed that any of the ways they were upset could count as humiliation. Those times, when people's ethical sense of what mattered in life was shaped by the hopes for self-realisation of the beautiful people, could hardly have been less congenial to capacity of the nurses to see things differently.

Four or five psychiatrists in that hospital insisted that the patients be treated humanely. They worked devotedly to improve their conditions. Most were young; all were idealistic. I admired them for their compassion. I also admired them for their courage, because they were ridiculed by the nursing staff and sometimes by their colleagues as soft-headed fools who had allowed themselves to be seduced by an idealistic illusion. Sometimes the scorn was fierce. At first that astonished me, but I later reflected that it had the same quality, that it was expressed in the same tone as the accusation, 'Nigger

Lover', or 'Jew Lover' directed against those who acknowledged the full humanity of a racially denigrated peoples. They found it as unintelligible that such patients should be accorded full respect as racists find it unintelligible that faces that look to them like the *Black and White Minstrel Show* caricature of an Afro-American face could express the full range and depth of human feeling. One of the psychiatrists said that the patients in that ward possessed an inalienable dignity. He said this in the hearing of a nurse who looked at him with incredulous contempt. It was the first time I heard that expression. I was moved and inspired, but I confess that I did not know what he meant, except that the patients should not be treated brutally, and that I should never lose sight of the fact that they could be humiliated.

One day, a nun came into the ward. In her middle years, only her vivacity made an impression on me until she talked to the patients. Then everything in her demeanour towards them - the way she spoke to them, her facial expressions, and the inflexions of her body - contrasted with and showed up the behaviour of those noble psychiatrists. She showed that they were, despite their best efforts, condescending, as I too had been. She thereby revealed that even such patients were, as the psychiatrists and I had sincerely and generously professed, the equals of those who wanted to help them; but she also revealed that in our hearts we did not believe this. I wondered at her, but not at anything about her except that her behaviour should have, so wondrously, this power of revelation. She showed up the psychiatrists, but if I were asked how, exactly, then I would not elaborate on defects in their character, their imagination, or in what would ordinarily be called their moral sensibility.

Of course her behaviour did not come from nowhere. Virtues of character, imagination and sensibility, given content and form by the disciplines of her vocation, were essential to her becoming the kind of person she was. But in another person such virtues and the behaviour that expressed them would have been the focus of my admiring attention. I admired the psychiatrists for their many virtues - for their wisdom, their compassion, their courage, their capacity for self-sacrificing hard work and sometimes for more besides. In the nun's case, her behaviour was striking not for the virtues it expressed, or even for the good it achieved, but for its power to reveal the full humanity of those whose affliction had made their humanity invisible. Love is the name we give to such behaviour.

Recall that one of the psychiatrists spoke of the inalienable dignity of the patients. The dignity to which the expressions 'inalienable dignity' and 'dignity' refer is not the dignity people seek to retain when they ask to die with dignity, spared the humiliations that attend some illnesses. That dignity is alienable because it depends essentially upon a person's demeanour in the face of suffering. The connection between dignity and a person's demeanour can, of course, carry over to situations in which a person no longer has a demeanour, when he is dead or in a coma for example, and in which we are concerned that nothing should be done that would, in the ordinary circumstances of life,

constitute a humiliation for him. Doctors and nurses will cover their genitals, for example.

But if that is so, why has the concept of inalienable dignity - a concept that appears to have been designed to enable its application to prescind from the demeanours associated with ordinary, alienable, dignity - why is it so appealing to us? Part of the answer, I think, is that because appeals to it are often invoked when a person has lost or is threatened with the loss of all visible dignity, it appears to keep that person in the same conceptual, moral space as the concept that marks what he has lost – for this is, it is important to notice an expression in the key of the noble, of the heroic. For that reason, it is easy to see why it is often deployed in struggles against oppression; especially oppression that is premised, as racial oppression is, on disdain, sometimes contempt, for the oppressed. It's also easy to see why it is such a well-suited partner for the idea of inalienable rights. That too is a concept in the key of the heroic. For that reason, people often speak of a dignity that is inherent in every human being, or of inalienable dignity, to which we owe, not esteem, but respect that is unconditional. That is why these words and phrases occur so often in preambles to international law.

When I was a student, it was the expression 'inalienable dignity', as it was used by one of the psychiatrists, that impressed me, but it is striking, I now realise, that I did not use it to characterise what I took the nun to have revealed, muddled though my efforts were. In the preface to *A Common Humanity* I say that the nun's behaviour gave living meaning to words I had heard often enough, but which I had thought could never refer to anything real - 'goodness' of a kind that invites a capital 'G', 'love', 'beauty' and 'purity'. Instinctively, but not at all clearly, when I wrote about the nun, I realised that to say that the nun had revealed their inalienable dignity was to speak in the wrong key – to oversimplify a little, it would have made her seem like a Kantian heroine, a doer of such astonishingly supererogatory deeds that even the psychiatrists seemed like mere foot soldiers in service to her noble cause. The mainstream of the philosophical tradition brings saints and heroes together, interchangeably for the most part, under the concept of a supererogatory act. But the saintly behaviour of the nun should be characterised in the light of a conception of morality that has goodness rather than one of the heroic virtues as its focal concept. My point is not that a conception of value that has goodness, rather than, say, nobility, as its focus is unable to appreciate the heroic. It is that within that conception what we make of the heroic, the noble, the honourable, the value of autonomy and so on, is transformed by the light that saintly deeds have cast on what it means to be a human being.

The point can be generalised to all the virtues: one's understanding of compassion, charity and so on, will be different according to whether it has been kind of goodness shown in saintly love or whether it hasn't. So too will our understanding of the affirmation that radical evildoers must remain fully our

fellow human beings. And of the 'Golden Rule' - that one should always treat others as one would wish them to treat oneself - which many people take to be the basic precept of morality, and to capture the essence of the biblical command to love one's neighbour.

At this point you may be impatient to press a question on me: why do I not acknowledge the obvious, that the nun behaved as she did because she had supernatural beliefs about the status of the patients? She believed they were sacred, that they were all God's children. Perhaps she would even offer abstract accounts about what such beliefs came to metaphysically. It is certainly the case, I freely admit, that many philosophical commentators on my work, especially those who have read the account of the nun, believe that it is implicitly religious.

In its most common form, the thought that I have been avoiding the obvious when I discussed explanations of her behaviour without mentioning that she had religious beliefs about the patients, assumes that the ascription to her of religious beliefs diminishes, even if it does not entirely extinguish, any tendency to think that her behaviour was wondrous for what it revealed. Ascription of religious beliefs to her is intended to render her behaviour fully explicable, even to someone who does not share them, because false beliefs can explain a person's behaviour as well as true ones. The rhetorical point of that question is to suggest that if there is something wondrous about her behaviour it is that she was able to do what many people who believe what she does cannot. The focus then is on her virtues, just as I focused on the psychiatrists and their virtues. On this account, if her behaviour was indeed wondrous, then it is because she did superlatively what the psychiatrists did only very well. But that is untrue to my experience at the time, experience to which I am bound in a kind of testimony. For me, her behaviour was not wondrous in the way a feat or a performance or a moral or psychological capacity to do something can be wondrous. When I came to reflect on what I had seen that day, that struck me as one of its most important features. I have been trying to outline the conceptual space that reveals it for what it is and where it can be seen without distortion. It is true that if I were I religious I would say that only grace enables one to see people like the patients in the hospital as they appeared in the light of the nun's behaviour. Not being religious, I have sought secular ways of expressing this without diminishing the wonder of it.

Furthermore, attribution to her of explicitly religious beliefs will not diminish the mystery of what she revealed. To say that she saw them as God's children does not diminish the mystery that we should have a concept of the sacred, or of what it is to be a child of God, that includes the idea that we should respond to people who are severely and ineradicably afflicted, who have as we put it 'lost their minds' and who will never recover them, without a trace of condescension.

Were I, therefore, in the light of her example, to try to answer the question – from where here did we get even so much as an idea that it is intelligible to respond as the nun did? – then I would say that it emerged in the history of saintly behaviour of the kind the nun showed towards the radically afflicted, and that historically, the cumulative affect of that behaviour generated a language of love in whose light any particular instance of it can appear to us as wondrous and call us to a kind of witness. Had it not been for the language of saintly love, nourished by the works of saints, we would not have a sense of what her love revealed and it would not have the power to reveal it. Much of that language is, of course, religious, or infused by a religious spirit, but what grows in one place may take root in another. Expressions – such as ‘inalienable dignity’ or talk of the ‘unconditional respect that is owed to all persons’ – sometimes gain their power because they resonate against the language of love rather than because they point, as the great philosopher Immanuel Kant to whom we owe them would insist, towards their philosophical elaboration in terms of the respect owed to rational agency.

A passage in Simone Weil’s a wonderful essay, ‘Human Personality’, provides an example of what I mean when I speak of the language of love. She asks, “What is it that is sacred in every human being?” She enumerates and rejects a number of facts about us. The list is not exhaustive, but its rhetorical point is that no list could provide a rational underpinning for our sense of what it means to wrong someone, especially when that wrong is a fundamental violation of them. She writes, “At the bottom of the heart of every human being, from earliest infancy until the tomb, there is something that goes on indomitably expecting, in the teeth of all experience of crimes committed, suffered and witnessed, that good and not evil will be done to him. It is this above all that is sacred in every human being ... Every time there arises from the depths of a human heart the childish cry which even Christ could not restrain, ‘Why am I being hurt?’, then there is certainly injustice. Many people do not hear it. For it is a silent cry which sounds only in the secret heart”.

I do not know of a finer, more hard-headed and more morally truthful way of expressing the wrong done to the people in that hospital when they were forced under a shower to be mopped down of their faeces. She writes to explain what it is that it is sacred in every human being. But the moral work is done without reference to the sacred or without essential reference to any religious concepts. A religious person, of course, might say that that is exactly as it should be. Perhaps: but that is another, longer, discussion.

In the preface to the second edition of *Good and Evil*, I discuss a question put to me by Stanley Hauerwas. Hauerwas has responded to my discussion of the nun and the question I put to him. I shall quote him at length:

Gaita acknowledges that religious traditions have spoken most simply and deeply about such a view by declaring all human beings sacred. But he contends that the language of love nourished by the love of saints can

stand independently of speculation about supernatural entities. What grew in one place can flourish elsewhere.

I certainly have no reason to suggest that Gaita's account of goodness, as non-condescending love is unintelligible if God does not exist. But then the question has never been about God's existence—but ours. Gaita is quite right to think that if Mother Teresa and the nun he encountered at seventeen did not exist we quite literally would be less human. They did exist, however, and it at least makes sense to ask if and how they and the goodness they reveal makes sense if the God they worship does not exist.

That may well be a far too abstract way to put the question. For the God they worship is not some abstraction but rather a reality known through participation in a community across time and space. What I suspect Gaita misses is the role that friendship plays in lives like that of Mother Teresa and the nun he so admires. In particular, Mother Teresa and the nun Gaita admired were not afraid to be befriended by those they served. To suggest why friendship is so important for the development of such goodness I want to introduce another life that exhibits the kind of love Gaita thinks so defining of goodness. The name of that life is Jean Vanier.

Jean Vanier is the founder of the movement known as L'Arche . . . in which people who are called mentally handicapped live with those who are not. L'Arche home is first and foremost just that, a home. The core members of the home are the mentally handicapped. Those who are not mentally handicapped are called assistants. Assistants do not live in the home to care for the mentally handicapped. Rather they are there to learn to be with the core members in the hope that they can learn to be friends.

Gaita suggests that the wonder that the nun should elicit in us is not to be directed at her but rather is the wonder that human life could be as her love reveals it. Jean Vanier would not wish that we wonder or react with awe in response to his life. Any wonder would rightly be in response to the humanity revealed through those who have befriended him. He and his friends reveal our humanity, a goodness, that we could not have known possible without their showing.

Jesus did not answer the young man's question concerning what deed he must do to inherit eternal life. Instead he commanded him to sell his possessions, give the money to the poor, and follow him. To learn to follow Jesus is the training necessary to become a human being. To be a human being is not a natural condition, but requires training. The kind of training required, moreover, has everything to do with death. To follow Jesus is to go with him to Jerusalem where he will be crucified.

To follow Jesus, therefore, is to undergo a training that refuses to let death, even death at the hands of enemies, determine the shape of our living.

To learn to live without protection is to learn to live without possessions. To be dispossessed, however, cannot be willed. To try to be dispossessed is to be possessed by the will to be dispossessed. Rather, as Jean Vanier's life reveals, to be dispossessed comes by being made a friend of those who have no possessions. They have had to learn to live without possessions. Jean Vanier had to learn from them how to live without the protections we think possessions provide.

Hauerwas asks whether the lives of the nun or of Vanier would have made sense if the God they prayed to did not exist. This question troubles me, but I do not know what to do with the trouble. It does not suggest a reason for entering on a path of investigation – an intellectual path – whose conclusion might be that there is a God. I suspect that Hauerwas would agree, for otherwise we are back with the God of religion, for only He, I think, can be found at the end of such a path. But then I am left more or less where I started, which is bound in testimony to something that I cannot understand, or that in one way does indeed not make sense. That is why I have often said in my work, that the difficulty I have in characterising my response to the nun is not merely a difficulty that derives from the fact that her behaviour is not supported by rational foundations. That applies to most – perhaps all – things that live for us only in the realm of meaning. That does not mean, however, that they are mysterious: there is nothing mysterious in the fact that we value courage for its nobility as well as for its practical value, but our sense of the nobility of courage is not underwritten by reason. Yet the nun's behaviour is mysterious, though I hasten to say that this is not so because our capacity for knowledge and understanding is limited. I do not mean that beings of a vastly superior intelligence would not find it mysterious. I argue this in detail in *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception*, second edition, and chapters 6 and 12.

The examples of Vanier and the nun are in an obvious sense 'extreme'. My work has sometimes been criticised as dependent on extreme examples. But, as I suggested earlier, the examples are not extreme in the sense of being at the furthest limits of heroic, or supererogatory acts. They are extreme – or at any rate I have introduced the nun and other examples to reveal what I have sometimes (uneasily) called the inalienable preciousness of every human being – because when one reflects on what they reveal, one wonders what gave us even the idea that it makes sense. From where could we even have got such an idea? But we do not wonder this when presented with examples of supererogatory nobility, or heroism. It is true that we often wonder how it is possible for someone to show such bravery, for example, but we then accept it as a fact of life that some, very rare, people can do it. If I have been at all successful in my depiction of the nun, then I hope I have shown that presented with such wondrous love, we can never simply accept that it is a fact of life

that some people are capable of it. That is why I said that I am claimed in a kind of witness to it.

There are examples of the kind of goodness shown by the nun that would not be regarded as 'extreme', but they are often taken as simply revealing exemplary natural goodness, an exceptionally good heart. My father befriended a man who was visibly insane – he talked to himself constantly, he cooked in his urine and he lived between two boulders that he covered with whatever he could find to protect him from the weather. His name was Vacek and I wrote about him in *Romulus, My Father* and again, this time reflecting on the issue I am now discussing, in *After Romulus*.

After I had written *Romulus, My Father*, a journalist asked me whether Vacek had seemed “weird” to me when I was a boy. Without hesitation I answered sincerely that he had not. Later, my answer puzzled me. Why had he not? Objectively, after all, he was very strange. The answer that came to me was that my father and Hora behaved towards Vacek without condescension. Had they condescended to him – had it shown in their tone of voice or demeanor, in their body language as we say – the cruel sensitivity children often possess would have made me conclude that Vacek was not entirely 'one of us'. As it was, the contrary was true. That was not because I was particularly virtuous. It was because I saw Vacek in the light of my father and Hora's behavior towards him, which only later did I realise was something to wonder at.

Few people would deny that one should treat people like Vacek without condescension, but in my experience hardly anyone is capable of it. In one way or another our condescension betrays itself in how we speak, in the tone of our voice, in the demeanours of our bodies – in what we call our body language. It is one thing to feel affection for such a man, even to esteem him for some important reasons. “Vacek is a good man”, my father's friend Hora often told me. But to do it without condescension? Here too I want to ask: from where would one get *even so much as the idea* that that makes sense?

My father was not a saint, but he befriended Vacek, fully, without reservation. No doubt that was why, as a boy, I accepted Vacek so readily and in such a way that I was able to say sincerely and spontaneously to the person who interviewed me that Vacek had not seemed weird to me. Now, having read Hauerwas, I am sure that his capacity to do that was inseparable from the role that the ethic of renunciation that played such a strong part in my father's life. It showed in his preparedness to suffer the humiliations of his compatriots, who thought his compassion towards my mother who had betrayed him, and his friend Mitru who had cuckolded, was shameful because unmanly. It was possible for him to disregard such humiliations, I think, only because he was the kind of man who could respond as he did to Vacek, but that was, in turn, possible only because he was prepared to suffer the humiliations that he did. In what I hope is not an intrusively didactic moment in *Romulus, My Father*, I say, “I have never known anybody who lived so passionately as did these two

friends (my father and Hora), the belief that nothing matters so much in life as to live it decently. Nor have I known anyone so resistant and contemptuous of the external signs of status and prestige”.

It will now perhaps be clear why I said that I find Weil and Hauerwas frightening. It may be that the examples that have inspired near all my work – to which, as I said, I am bound in a kind of testimony – can exist only in people who lives of such radical unworldliness. What can sustain people in those lives? I do not know. I will leave discussion of that admission to the panel.

* * *

It is wondrous that most of us agree that people who suffer severe and degrading treatment should be treated as fully our equals without condescension, or that evildoers are owed unconditional respect different from esteem. That we can agree on this more or less as a matter of course, and usually forgetfully of how wondrous it is; a sublime achievement of our cultural history. So, at any rate, it seems to someone like me who is not religious. Yet, it is hard to know with confidence or clarity the deepest reasons why we are committed to what matters most to us ethically and spiritually. That is true of individuals and also of cultures. Given the historical importance of religion in shaping our sensibility – consciously and unconsciously – even if only through art, that is not surprising. To become lucid about this we need to understand how to assess when we are legitimately moved by art that appears to have content to which we may not honestly be able to assent.

Our sense of what it is for something to be offered as a reason in much of what we say about ethical religious and political matters is conditioned by the concepts that define the realm of meaning, which means that we should acknowledge that public reason is inescapably *medias res*. It is there that we argue about what counts as love, including love of one’s neighbour or love of god. It is there that we argue about what to means to wrong someone, and what kind of compassion might be shown to the afflicted. It is there that we argue about how we should respond morally and legally to people who have done the most morally terrible things and who are totally lacking in remorse. It is there that we discuss what it means for someone to be tortured, or what is so terrible about genocide, what it means for a woman be to raped in war such that we should call that rape a crime against humanity; it is there that we discuss what it means morally for something to be a crime against humanity; and, indeed, what it is for something to be a crime. There we discuss what it is for something to count genuinely as love of country rather than jingoism, of what it means morally to be ashamed for the deeds of the country one loves. And so on. In many ways our discussions of these matters are attuned – sometimes well sometimes badly - to the, tones, resonances and allusions of the natural language in which we conduct them.

* * *

We often speak of discussion in politics as a form of conversation. Most forms of human interchange can turn into a conversation, in what one might call the loaded sense of the term – as we mean it when, for example, we exclaim joyfully that at last we have found someone really to talk to, or when we speak of ‘real’ conversation, distinguishing it from many other forms of discourse— from the exchange of pleasantries or talk directed to a particular end, a business contract or a seminar, for example. In all such conversations one can unexpectedly find oneself answerable to what elsewhere I have described as a ‘call to seriousness’. That is a burden inseparable from the joy of having found someone really to talk to. But even when the call to seriousness is just an exasperated, “For God’s sake, think!”, it is always to a particular individual, unique and irreplaceable, and it calls her to an individuating responsiveness, to speak out of what she has made, and should continuously be making, of experiences that are her history and that make her who she is. The call is at one and the same time that she speak disinterestedly in the sense that implies that she should try to overcome the many temptations of what Iris Murdoch called the ‘fat relentless ego’, and that she speak personally, that she speak in, or recover, or even for the first time find the voice that reveals her distinctive take on the world, that reveals, as Kierkegaard put it, that she has lived her own life and no one else’s. Inevitably calls to seriousness are sometimes severe. Why would we be joyful that at last we have some ‘really to talk to’, unless we trusted that person to be severe with us when necessary? It would, of course, be foolish to believe that the kind of answerability to another person’s call to seriousness and the kind of individuality that is required to rise to it could be fully realised in the relations between politicians and citizens, or between citizens themselves, no matter how well things seem to go on talkback radio or Q&A. Real conversation is difficult in most circumstances. Were it not so, we would not be struck by the exclamation “At last, someone to talk to!” Nonetheless, when the notion of conversation is used, explicitly or implicitly, in the practice of politics, we – politicians and citizens – are reminded that citizens are individuals, answerable to one another, answerable to politicians, and that politicians are in turn answerable to them. It is not, I think, fanciful to say that a politician, explicitly on talkback radio but also implicitly in the manner of his speech on television, can enter into a relationship with citizens where he is answerable to the challenge, “Are you serious? Do you expect me to believe that? Do you take me for a fool?” and so on.

Bringing democratic politics under the constraints of conversation is a way of dramatising the ideal of democracy as a form of government in which politicians must argue their cause and legitimately persuade the electorate, answerable to it not as to a mass, but as to individuals whose need of truth they must not betray. But as I have already suggested, really to converse one must speak with a particular voice, or to adapt a marvelous line from Isaac Bashevis Singer, one must speak from an address. That is also true of the voice of faith.

Faith is not the isolated achievement of individuals, whatever one says about its personal nature. It always emerges in a particular culture, and is mediated by a particular natural language. One cannot learn that language alone, or with only with others of the same faith. The language of faith mixes in all sorts of ways with the language with which we speak of other things – about almost every other thing. It is, therefore, naturally talkative. If the idea of reason abstracted from context to operate in a tone-free zone is a myth – or at any rate one that cannot engage with our ethical concepts, with the concepts with which we express our responses to life and which enable us to make meaning of those things and in which or moral concepts are embedded – so too is the idea that deliverances of faith derive from communication directly between god and a particular believer. Faith in and in the meaning in of a human life of the God is always expressed in English, or French, or Arabic or Hebrew, for example. That was the significance of my remarks earlier about the difference between the God of the Philosophers and the God of Religion. It is foolish to think that for the purposes of democratic politics, God should speak in Esperanto.

Calls to seriousness can, as I said, be severe. We must take seriously what is an offence to people of faith in our community – though as every one knows that is a delicate matter, especially as criticism can justifiably be severe and therefore hurtful. Often it will depend on the spirit which criticism is made, which requires judgement of a kind that is to be seriously responsive to the categories that define the realm of meaning. It won't help to be tone deaf. To ban satire about any important matter would be a serious blow to free speech, but it takes a good ear for tone, to know when satire merely – if I might put it this way - causes pain, and when it is unjustifiably offensive to the persons whose beliefs have been satirised. For a non-religious person, the object of respect must be the person rather than God. But to respect the person, one must be sufficiently inward with his or her belief to know how to strike the right critical note. That will make the difference between a severe, painful call to seriousness, informed by the hope that the conversation will remain open hostile criticism and that will justifiably close it.

Sadly this is not true of much contemporary hostility to religion.

Those who have read *Romulus My Father* will know that I learnt much of this from him. I'll close with quotation from *Romulus*.

In one sense of the term, my father was a fierce moralist. Not about the big and controversial issues of the day, but about simple moral requirements such as honesty and concern for one's neighbour. If he thought you were a liar or a cheat or had acted unkindly, then he would say so to you without a trace of euphemism. But there was never anything in his judgement that implied you should be shunned by decent people. Though fierce and uncompromising, his judgements

were not what we now call judgemental. Even his most severe judgements were made in many tones. If he called you an incorrigible liar he might do it angrily, scathingly, sorrowfully or, strange as it might sound, matter-of-factly, but never in a tone that suggested he would turn his back on you. You were always welcome at his table, to eat and more importantly, to talk, always to talk. But he believed that it was essential to decent conversation that one not pretend to virtues one did not possess - as essential as being truthful about one's identity. Only then could conversation be true to its humane potentialities and do its humanising work of opening up the possibilities of authentic human disclosure.

