

Virtue Gone Mad

by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (June 2019)



The modern world is full of the old Christian virtues gone mad. The virtues have gone mad because they have been isolated from each other and are wandering alone. Thus some humanitarians only care for pity; and their pity (I am sorry to say) is often untruthful.

– G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*

Christianity may be dead in the sense that few of the educated class go regularly to church, believe in the literal truth of the Gospels or think that unbelievers will spend an eternity in hell. Indeed, even the beliefs of the clergy are often far from clear nowadays. Ask a Church of England clergyman what he actually believes and you are quite likely to receive a reply that makes the predictions of the average economist about the future of the economy seem categorical by comparison.

But a set of beliefs that has shaped a civilisation and been held for almost two millennia cannot be sloughed off as a snake sloughs off its skin. Besides, the underlying snake remains much the same, albeit rather fresher-looking; and even if it were altogether a good thing (of which I am by no means convinced) that the western world had abandoned Christian belief as it has abandoned Middle Eastern Christians to their fate, it would be surprising, indeed astonishing, if

Christianity had disappeared from our minds leaving no trace whatever.

At first sight, the wholly secular understanding of the world and human existence which most intellectuals and educated people now share has little in common with, and is actually opposed to, the formerly religious understanding of the world and human existence that most people once adhered to. It is a worldview that is my own: I have no belief whatever in an externally-decreed purpose to life in general and to my life in particular, and I see no reason to believe that my fate is anything other than extinction once and for all. I might wish it were otherwise, but wishes are not a good guide to reality.

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Despite a widespread denial of, or even hostility towards, any Christian belief, however, secular ethics in the west remain deeply imbued with Christian principles, even if they are misapplied. If Christ told us to render unto Caesar those things which are Caesar's, we return the compliment by refusing to render unto God those things which are God's, transposing to earth His promises of the afterlife to life here below.

Forgiveness of sins, loving one's enemy and turning the other cheek if he strikes you, the moral superiority of the poor

over the rich, atonement and redemption, are still very much present in the moral psychology of the west, even among the explicitly atheist. They obviously derive from Christianity, even if their ultimate justification (if any) is entirely different from that offered by Christianity.

The sacred and the secular have long been approaching one another. Liberation theology in Latin America is almost indistinguishable in its eschatology from Marxism, while to listening to a Church of England bishop these days is like listening to a radical sociologist *circa* 1970. Meanwhile, policemen and politicians utter sentiments that one might have expected of minor clerics a hundred years ago.

In Britain, whenever a spokesman for the police is called upon to make a statement about a horrible murder, he or she always intones some such words as 'Our thoughts and prayers are first with the victim's family,' as if the job of the police were to express empathy for the bereaved or act as grief counsellors. Not only do we sense immediately that this is bogus—policemen by the nature of their work are disinclined to the kind of thoughts and prayers here alleged, and the lying pretence undermines belief in their probity—but the best thing they can do for the bereaved is to catch the culprit and bring him to justice. The best therapy for victims of crime, in my medical experience, is the apprehension and suitable punishment of the perpetrator, which restores their faith in a just world. They do not want to be talked to by the police as if they were suffering from some kind of psychiatric disorder and therefore in need of amateur psychotherapy.

In 2013, the European Court of Human Rights reached a verdict in which three convicted murderers in Britain claimed that

their fundamental human rights were breached by having been sentenced to life imprisonment without possibility of release.

The three murderers were hardly fine upstanding men. The first of them murdered for a second time—his wife—shortly after his release from a prison sentence for his first murder. The second killed his entire family of five while trying to place the blame on one of the victims. (He also claimed to be innocent, but that was not basis of his appeal to the ECHR. If he really were innocent, of course, his rights were infringed even by a single day of imprisonment after his false conviction.) The third of the appellants had killed four young men for his sexual pleasure. But all three claimed that, in not being given the prospect of release or reduction of their penalty in time, their human rights were infringed.

In essence, the court upheld their claim. It did not go so far as to say that they should be released at some time or other in the future, but it said that, by depriving them of the possibility of remorse, repentance, atonement and rehabilitation (the secular version or equivalent of redemption), they were deprived of their human rights.

This is precisely what Chesterton meant when he said that Christian virtues would go mad once they had become unmoored from the theological and metaphysical beliefs from which they took their meaning: for remorse, repentance, atonement and redemption have a very different significance in the penological context from that in a theological one.

Let us take remorse, repentance and atonement first. It ought

to be obvious that these require inner states that lose their meaning when their public expression is a precondition of a tangible benefit such as early release from prison. They then become something more akin to a Maoist session of self-criticism than remorse and atonement in the Christian sense. To be real, they must be separated from reward—except one in the next world, whose receipt is uncertain and not in the gift of any human being.

I was once asked by a visitor to the prison in which I worked why it was that so many murderers seemed to express remorse for what they had done about eight years into their sentence. The answer was that this was about the time when most of them began to be eligible for release, but release would not have been granted without expressions of remorse: and demand creates supply, even in this context. Of course, I also met murderers who were remorseful from the first, before expressions of remorse could bring them any benefit; but they were fewer than those who produced remorse because it was demanded of them.

Needless to say, I too believe in the value of remorse and repentance, but as moral qualities and not as determinants of the length or severity of any punishment. The legal demand for remorse undermines the rule of law, for its expression is usually taken as a proxy for the likelihood of re-offending. Not only is the connection between remorse and re-offending uncertain—I am genuinely remorseful when I indulge in a bad habit to which I resolve never again to succumb, but I am fully aware that I may nevertheless do so again, as I often have in the past—but the sincerity of remorse can be known only to him who feels it. If you reduce prison sentences for the publicly remorseful, you might be rewarding good actors and, as a corollary, punishing bad ones. *De facto*, therefore,

you punish people on an extremely uncertain speculation about what they might do in the future, not what they have done. Leaving it up to doctors, social workers and psychologists to determine the sincerity of a person's repentance is to introduce a disquieting arbitrariness into the law, all because of an improper application of the Christian concept of repentance. Almost certainly, the appellant to the ECHR who murdered for a second time soon after his release after having served his sentence for his first murder had expressed remorse and repentance to a degree sufficient to persuade the authorities of their sincerity. And indeed, they might have been perfectly sincere at the time; but they were quite beside the point. One ought not to render unto Caesar those things which are God's.

The ECHR also ruled that by depriving the prisoners of the chance of rehabilitation—in other words, secular redemption—the sentence of imprisonment in perpetuity was a derogation of their human rights. This, of course, is to assume that punishment is mainly therapeutic in purpose, a potentially very dangerous notion in as much as it places no limits on the severity of the punishment that could be applied provided only that it was efficacious, and could also justify punishment *before* the committal of any crime, much as vaccination prevents diseases.

What does it actually mean to rehabilitate—to redeem—a man who has murdered four young men for his sexual pleasure? Imagine being the mother of one of the man's victims and being told that the authorities had concluded that the man had been rehabilitated, redeemed, and was therefore now ready to re-enter society. Would it not be a terrible agony to her, an indication that the authorities had absolutely no idea of the gravity of what had been done to her son, that they

trivialised it by their misplacement of the Christian notion of redemption? As for forgiveness, another Christian virtue, it is here quite out of place, for even if the mother forgave the misery the murderer had caused her, she could not forgive him on behalf of the son, the man whom he most severely wronged. His crime is quite literally unforgiveable, at least in the here-below: only God could forgive it. Thus, a court can extend mercy but not forgiveness; and mercy itself must be exercised with discretion, for incontinent mercy soon becomes mere cowardice, indifference to what has been done, or even an exercise in cost-cutting.

The ECHR, in its misplaced application of Christian virtues (in which misapplication it is far from alone), ruled that no punishment should be extended if it no longer served a penological purpose. Let us, then, conduct a thought experiment. Suppose Heinrich Himmler had not committed suicide and had survived. Let us suppose that he repented what he had done, fully and unreservedly acknowledging that it had been wrong. It was impossible that he should repeat his crimes, which were committed under particular historical circumstances that surely would never arise again. His punishment would deter no one, for the reason just given: no one else could or would repeat his performance. Therefore, punishment of him would serve no penological purpose and, according to the ECHR, he should go free. It would be an infringement of his human rights to punish him. The mere justice of doing so would count for nothing.

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While our societies might be post-Christian in the sense that the majority of the educated population would disavow any Christian belief, yet many of them try to be Christ-like in their thoughts and actions. 'Judge not that ye be not judged' said Christ; and they pride themselves on not being *judgmental*. 'Be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you' said St Paul; and they forgive those who commit the worst of crimes against third parties. 'He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none,' said Christ; and they advocate increased taxation and foreign aid as the acme of charity. 'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you,' said Christ; and they love, bless and do good to Islamists.

So Christianity is not quite dead, at least in the sense that its influence is still considerable. The Christian virtues have gone mad, just as Chesterton said they had, and they wander the world like lost sheep.

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