

Inaugural Seminar on Ethical Standards in Public Life

9 October 2014

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Consider the following letter of resignation:

I am sorry to confess that, going back some years, I have been unfaithful to my promises as a Catholic priest. I would like to reassure you that my actions were not illegal and did not involve minors.

As a result, however, I have decided to offer my resignation as bishop with immediate effect and will now take some time to consider my future.

I want to apologise first of all to the individuals hurt by my actions and then to all of those inside and outside the diocese who will be shocked, hurt and saddened to hear this.

I am sorry for the shame that I have brought on the diocese and the Church and I ask for your prayers and forgiveness.

At the end of September 2014 the Rt Rev Kieran Conry, the Bishop of Arundel and Brighton, sent his resignation to the Pope after admitting to an affair six years ago and apologising to congregations for being “unfaithful to my promises as a Catholic priest”. The words he used reveal something of our current confusion about public ethics.

He went on to say to the Daily Mail, whose Sunday paper broke the story:

It has been difficult keeping the secret. In some respects I [now] feel very calm. It is liberating. It is a relief. I have been very careful not to make sexual morality a priority [in his sermons]. I don't think it got in the way of my job, I don't think people would say I have been a bad bishop. But I can't defend myself. I did wrong. Full stop.'

What we see here is the collation, and collision, of virtue ethics and a utilitarian consequentialism. He talks of the absolute. ***I have been unfaithful to my promises as a Catholic priest....*** The bishop clearly knows that his behaviour

has been inconsistent with his public calling. ***I can't defend myself. I did wrong. Full stop.***

And yet he goes on to mount, if not a defence, then a mitigation. ***My actions were not illegal and did not involve minors... I have been very careful not to make sexual morality a priority. I don't think it got in the way of my job, I don't think people would say I have been a bad bishop.***

There is a tension here. He has admitted by his resignation – which Pope Francis accepted – that it is impossible for a bishop to venture moral judgements in one area when he has found himself so wanting in another. And yet he seeks to make a distinction between one area of morality, on matters of sex, and others.

This is a particularly vivid example from the recent news. (And I'd like to add, on a personal note, a very sad one, since I have always found Kieran to be an inspiring, kindly and generous priest.) And yet the bishop is not alone. Society in general is also unable to make up its mind about consequentialist and virtue ethics.

Virtue ethics has its roots in Aristotle and beyond. It focuses on moral character. A good person should be honest, charitable and benevolent. Good character comes from good moral habits and makes us the kind of people we ought to be. This notion has been the dominant one in Western moral philosophy until the Enlightenment after which it fell out of fashion and was replaced by the utilitarian ethic which defined the good as that which brought the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people. Character began to be replaced by rules.

Not entirely. Virtue has survived as a code in some spheres of life. It is there in the moral habit which resides in the comradeship and discipline of the army. The rhetoric may be of King and Country but the practice of moral mutual interdependence relies upon the notion of a sacred band of brothers. It is there in the judiciary; a judge who commits a crime should quit the bench, as must a magistrate convicted of drink driving. It has a residuum in politics; a chancellor of the exchequer who becomes bankrupt cannot expect to continue in office. More generally a shop assistant who is caught with their fingers in the till cannot expect to easily find another job where they will be trusted to handle someone else's money. Aspects of character are still refracted through some facets of public life.

But there has been general slippage. A Foreign Secretary who has an extra-marital affair is not now necessarily expected to resign. Virtue ethics might have suggested that a man who is prepared to betray his wife cannot be trusted not to

betray his country. But the view that personal fidelity relates to public reliability no longer gains much traction. Today, as we see from the football field, winning is more important than fair play, as the very term “professional foul” discloses.

Actions are now most generally judged by consequences, and the focus for those consequences is tight and direct and utilitarian. Collateral damage is considered acceptable in ethics as well as in warfare.

“In what other job would a person who’d had an affair have to resign?” one liberal commentator asked recently, in disapproval of the resignation of the government minister Brooks Newmark after it was found that he had sent a graphic photograph of himself – in his paisley pyjamas – to a red-top reporter posing as a 20-year-old female Tory party activist. “Where else is sexual conduct considered anybody else’s business?” the Guardian feminist continued. “Why must politicians’ sexual morality be so abstruse, so distant from the codes the rest of us live by... Sometimes the heart wants what it wants and that erring is human. People are not shunned or shamed,” she concluded. “Grown adults can do whatever they like as long as both of them are over the age of consent”. Try telling that to the politician’s wife, four sons and daughter.

Several things complicate consideration of the private lives of public figures.

One is the notion of Public Interest, which many in the media (incidentally) find wilfully difficult to distinguish from What Interests the Public – such as paisley pyjamas. The Sunday Mirror defended its exposure of Mr Newmark on the grounds that he had chosen to campaign for getting more Conservative women into parliament. His requests for naked photographs from a woman he supposed to be eager to become a Tory candidate therefore constituted an abuse of an imbalance of power. Critics of the paper attacked the reporter for entrapment (there is a whole separate debate to be had about honeytraps, going back to Judith in the Old Testament, and when they are, and are not, legitimate). The reporter’s critics were on more solid ground in criticising his use of photographs stolen from the internet to lure the politician – a technique used on social media by paedophiles bent on grooming children.

It is worth noting, as an aside here, how such arguments complicate cloud the public debate on ethics is clouded by introducing both self-interest and self-righteousness. Those who attacked or defended both newspaper or politician, by and large, had vested interests in one side or the other. It often aids clarity in debate to disentangle motives from morality.

A second complication in considering the private behaviour of public figures is the business of Role Models. This is why, contrary to our Guardian feminist, we

expect – and it is right to expect – higher standards from those in public positions, be they priest or politician, rock star or footballer, than apply in private life. The behaviour of celebrities, to use the term in its loosest form, is emulated by others, most particularly the young. Again moral equivalence does not apply, since better behaviour is expected of some than others, largely on the basis of their track record – which is why extra-marital bad behaviour by (I can say as a Man Utd supporter) Ryan Giggs was more shocking than by Wayne Rooney. Again we could have a whole debate on that. This series of seminars will be looking at a range of interesting areas – politicians, political parties, medicine, diplomacy, economics and whether the changing way we wage war shifts our ethical understanding of conflict and combat.

Is a purely secularist ethic sufficiently robust to sustain our public ethics? It ought to be, but it appears difficult. The shift from virtue to utilitarian consequentialism has led us into a deontological approach which increasingly emphasises not even duties so much as rules – and not just broad moral rules such as “Do unto others as you would be done by”.

We live in a more dishonest country than we did a decade ago. A survey a couple of years ago showed the British public are more likely now than we were in 2000 to lie on an application form, buy something which we know is stolen, or drive under the influence of alcohol. That is according to a 2012 survey by the Centre for the Study of Integrity at the University of Essex. But in one sense we already knew that. Scandals surrounding MPs’ expenses, greedy bankers, paedophile priests, bribes to policemen, dodgy journalism and football finance have raised question after question about integrity in public life. So it is no real surprise to discover that low-level dishonesty among ordinary people has been on the rise too when it comes to things like dodging fares, keeping money we find in the street or failing to leave a note after damaging a parked car. Women, it seems, have slightly more integrity than men, but social class and occupation do not appear from the survey to have any significant effect on levels of honesty. **Thou shalt not be found out** has replaced many of the Ten Commandments.

The general corrective approach of recent decades has been to introduce more rules and regulations. But, as Onora O’Neill pointed out, in her 2002 Reith Lectures, we are discovering that tightening rules merely increases levels of suspicion and mistrust – as individuals see regulations merely as more obstacles to be got around rather than as moral precepts by which to live. Once the spirit of the law is set aside, its letter becomes a hindrance to be circumvented in the game of winning at all costs. It was shocking to discover, in a survey to mark the 25th anniversary of the Big Bang financial deregulation of the City of London, that 86 per cent of its financial services professionals no longer know that the motto of the London Stock Exchange is ‘My Word is My Bond’. That’s 86 per cent.

And the City, like the army and the judiciary, was at one time a core residuum of the approach and values of virtue ethics.

There is a paradox here. Trust is the glue which holds society together. Without it we could not even get up in the morning. We trust that the radio will tell us the right time, that the toothpaste will not be not poisonous, that other drivers on the road will try to steer safely. We trust that teachers are working to educate our children, and that our GP is not out to kill us. Life is simply too short to question the motives of everyone around us. Trust is the default mechanism of a civilised society.

Onora O'Neill suggests that in practice we all trust as much as before. What is different is that we all SAY we don't. We don't trust the food industry, but we continue to shop in supermarkets. We don't trust the police, but we call them when there is trouble. We don't trust journalists, but repeat much of what we read in newspapers. The problem is, says O'Neill, that we have misdiagnosed what ails British society, and so we are taking the wrong medicine. We are imposing ever more stringent forms of control and accountability. Yet ironically these often serve only to reinforce the fears they set out to allay. And those whom we refuse to trust become less trustworthy.

So there is consensus that we need to find ways of rebuilding trust. That was partly what lay behind David Cameron's Big Society in 2010 or Ed Miliband's talk, the year after, of "moral capitalism". What all such enterprises need to discover are some mutually acceptable moral principles to underpin the process.

But those need to rely on something more than mere social consensus. More rules are not the answer, but greater integrity. Yet contemporary society is persistently moving in the wrong direction on this. We have ever more health and safety rules where we should have common sense. We have targets, which become perverse ends in themselves. We talk about ID cards, as if something physical could ever replace something abstract, like trust.

Religion has the language to address this deficit: ***we need to redirect ourselves towards what God means us to be***. In Catholic Social Teaching the Common Good embodies a sense of virtue; our virtue is a contribution to the Common Good. But religion is out of fashion. As Alasdair MacIntyre said in *After Virtue* there still lingers in our society the urge to revere the ruins of Abrahamic ethics but our society has lost the wherewithal and understanding to rebuild on them. Philosophy has tried; in 1958 Elizabeth Anscombe wrote a seminal article, "Modern Moral Philosophy" which sought to rehabilitate Aristotelian virtue ethics while crystallising an increasing dissatisfaction with the forms of deontology and utilitarianism which have become increasingly normative.

The challenge of an institute like this, and this series of seminars, is to do what I hope in a much more modest way my writing strives to achieve – to take the insights of religion and virtue ethics and translate them into a secular language that has a wider popular appeal.