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# Using the Bible in Christian Ethics

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My life has been lived within a triangle. The first side of the triangle is the church, in which my father, grandfather and great-grandfather served as priests before me, and which I understand as the visible form of a people's corporate response to the gift and call of God in Jesus, made incarnate in being continually drawn together in worship and mutual care, and continually scattered to share with others the fruits of the Spirit. The second side is a deep-seated perception of poverty as a pervading social crisis locally and globally, along with an assumption that Christ is most habitually to be encountered among the poor. The third side is an impulse to dwell on configurations of ideas and arguments, particularly as they arise out of and reflect back on contexts of commitment and practice. Ordinary church, meeting Christ among the poor, and theological reflection therefore more or less map the contours of my vocation.

What I want to do tonight is to describe how I see the contemporary field of Christian ethics, to explain where I believe the most fertile territory is for Christians seeking to be faithful in challenging times, to describe that fertile territory in more detail, to show how I have tried to push deeper into that fertile soil, and finally to consider some aspects of the contemporary context in the light of my proposals. So I begin with the contemporary field of Christian ethics.

## Contemporary Christian Ethics

The way I was taught ethics, it was basically a face-off between two rival conceptions of how to pursue the good. The one approach, known as deontological ethics, is based around an absolute sense of right and wrong. Precisely where those qualities of right and wrong are located is understood differently by various proponents. Most obviously, those who follow divine command ethics locate them within God's revealed word, explicitly the Ten Commandments and other scriptural passages that leave little apparent room for ambiguity. Meanwhile those who advocate natural law ethics locate right and wrong in the discernment of the precepts, limits and purposes written into human existence as a creature. Then there are those who follow Immanuel Kant, for whom right is equivalent to duty, and duty can be rationally discerned by each individual person's conscience, provided they follow a rule which he calls the categorical imperative.

The other approach, known as consequential ethics, makes relative judgments about right and wrong by evaluating the likely outcomes of different possible actions. In other words it shifts attention from action (or motivation) to outcome. The most common form of consequentialism is utilitarianism, which seeks to calculate the good by assessing what will bring about the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Consequentialism has attracted a great deal of anxiety because in most of its forms it seems to abandon an absolute sense of right and wrong, and thus to open the door to moral relativism. Nonetheless because it doesn't appear to require commitment to a prior system of belief or reasoning, and because it upholds the subtler quality of common sense over the simpler commitment to consistency, it has proved to be the dominant style of reasoning in public discourse and policy-making. When Barack Obama said in his inauguration address in January 2009 that he was committed to "What works," he was propounding the essence of consequentialism.

While these two understandings of ethics long seemed the only two players in the game, in the last 50 years they have come under criticism on broadly two grounds, both of which highlight what they have in common, and thus I see them as two versions of the same approach, which I call "universal ethics," rather than two rival approaches.

The first criticism is that both are unaware of, or unconcerned by, their common assumption that the white, Western male is the unquestioned universal moral subject. Because they are both fundamentally concerned to offer a perspective that is binding on everybody, they exclude or ignore information that is particular to agents or circumstances or activities. But such information is, the criticism maintains, the heart of ethics. Moreover, the Jesus of the gospels seems less

inclined to overarching theories that work in all circumstances, and more drawn to the plight of the least, the last and the lost. Jesus, this criticism maintains, exhibits a bias to the poor. Thus Christian ethics should imitate Jesus in privileging the perspective of those on the underside of class, race and/or gender prejudice, disadvantage, discrimination, or exclusion. I call this criticism, and the field of ethics it inaugurates, “subversive ethics,” because it believes ethics is not so much for everybody, but principally for the excluded.

The second criticism of deontological and consequential ethics is that they both assume that the focus of ethics is the agent’s moment of decision. But life is not lived lurching from crisis to crisis. What an agent even perceives as a dilemma, and the way the agent would describe that quandary, is dependent on the world in which that agent imagines themselves to be living, and how they already see that world. When an agent does face a crisis, they will act from habit rather than from rule or calculation. On January 15, 2009 US Airways flight 1549 from LaGuardia airport, New York, to Charlotte, NC, with 155 passengers and crew on board, was disabled by a flock of Canada geese that flew into its engines three minutes after takeoff. The pilot, Chesley Sullenberger, drawing on countless years of rehearsal for multiple emergencies, calmly surveyed the possible options before ditching safely in the Hudson River, with no loss of life. Sullenberger was not aware at any stage that he had made a decision: he had simply conformed to the best practice in which he had been trained. Hence the significance of the Duke of Wellington’s words after the final defeat of Napoleon in 1815: “The battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton.” By the time the English troops were on the battlefield, the key factors relating to their success or failure were already in place. They had been settled in the formation of character of the commanding officers at English public schools a decade or more previously.

The question then becomes, how does character become formed so that, when a flock of geese hit an aircraft, or soldiers face a battle, the important parts of the story have already happened, and what would otherwise be a crisis no longer appears like the crucial moment? It is this question that is at the root of the third strand of contemporary ethics, which I call “ecclesial ethics.” I call it ecclesial ethics because the answer many contemporary theologians give to this central question is that this is precisely what the church does. It forms the characters of its members so that they learn to take the right things for granted, and no longer experience life as a sequence of insoluble dilemmas. Chesley Sullenberger and the Duke of Wellington are not substitutes for the church, but rather they witness to the fact that the only way in which character is formed is through sustained communities of practice that foster traditions in which the character of members is shaped over time. How the church actually does this has been the subject of a good deal of my own writing. What binds the diverse field of ecclesial ethics together is that, like subversive ethicists but for slightly different reasons, its proponents are suspicious of the whole project of universal ethics, which they see as an attempt to save the world without the need for the church in general and Jesus in particular. Ecclesial ethicists often share the criticisms subversive ethics makes of universal ethics, but in turn find fault with much of subversive ethics because it seems to be content with criticism and to lack a sufficiently constructive agenda.

Many people in higher education and public life find it easier to incorporate subversive ethics than ecclesial ethics. It has become commonplace to advocate for diversity and promote programmes that enhance the accessibility of education to underrepresented social groups. But the fear about ecclesial ethics lingers in two minor and two major keys.

The two minor reservations are, first, that the church the ecclesial proponents talk about does not exist – that it is a fantasy made permitted only by ignoring the hopelessly divided contemporary reality and its convoluted and often ignominious history. To this I can only say that I have served as a pastor for 25 years and throughout that time I have always been able to say that the church the ecclesial ethicists describe exists in the congregation I have been with at the time. Critics who say the church of ecclesial ethics doesn’t exist seem to assume that Jesus founded the church on the Beloved Disciple, full of grace and truth, whereas all the gospel writers tell us in fact he founded the church on Peter, full of clumsiness and fragility. The second minor reservation is that Christians have no special claim on the good, in theory or in practice. There are plenty of people who are good but not Christian. I have no problem in celebrating vignettes of grace wherever they may dwell, but it seems to me the logic of this version of universal ethics is to assume that Jesus

Christ's incarnation, life, death and resurrection made no material difference to human possibility, and that, while being a respectable philosophical position, is not an orthodox theological one.

The two major reservations are, first, that if it gives up the shared project of universal ethics, Christianity has no public way of advocating that its claims are true. Kantian and consequential ethics are all about seeking grounds for public evaluation that do not depend on revelation. To give up on this quest feels to many like fideism – the holding to truth claims that have no visible means of support. The second, and most widely aired, major reservation is that if Christians are principally concerned with fostering their own virtues, they might be expected to withdraw from the public square into a sequestered space of pious righteousness. I would respond to both these concerns by asking again, in a postmodern vein, whether there really is such a thing as universal ethics, or such a thing as a unitary public square, that are not the construction of those with the power and interest to claim it is so. If there is no neutral territory for ethics to occupy, no neutral public square for the church to inhabit, surely the church must ensure that, when it is interacting with those of other faiths or none, it is doing so as the church, and when its members are in plural conversations across traditions it is their baptism, rather than their race or nationality or species, that they are regarding as the definitive mark of their own identity. Some ecclesial thinkers have been criticized for a somewhat loose employment of the term “Constantinian” to refer to the church's overextended desire to have a significant influence in public life. But Constantinianism fundamentally means the tendency of Christians to regard themselves as having a mark of identity more fundamental or more consequential than their baptism.

Before moving on to describe in more detail what I earlier described as the fertile soil of ecclesial ethics, I want to circle back for a moment to my own narrative with which I began. I knew from an early age that I had the ability to be a thinker and a writer. I took for granted that this would be in a public sphere, such as journalism or university life. But I lost any conviction in academic and literary pursuits because they seemed to offer little to and indeed distract from what I took to be the primary call on my life, to meet Christ among the poor. In this sense you can see I made the journey from universal to subversive ethics. But as I came to reflect on good and less good ways to be with and work with socially disadvantaged people, I came to appreciate that I had nothing to bring to such encounters, and no real idea of who I was, outside my relationship to Christ and to the church. For, after all, the church is no more and no less than those whose identities are likewise defined by their relationship to Jesus. And without the church I had no way of knowing that my notion of Jesus was anything other than a projection and reflection of my own desires and imaginings. Thus I came to make the journey to ecclesial ethics. And your kind invitation to me to speak to you today is a happy indication that somehow along the way the thinking and writing, that I had originally rejected because it seemed like a self-indulgent solo quest, has become integrated into service of the church.

And now to set out the contours of ecclesial ethics.

## **Ecclesial Ethics**

Simply put, ecclesial ethics is a fusion of Aristotle and the New Testament. In more contemporary terms, it is the sometimes uneasy meeting-point of two major turns on philosophy and theology: the recovery of virtue, represented by figures such as Alasdair MacIntyre; and the Christocentric turn in ethics inspired by Karl Barth but embodied more specifically by the Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder. To map the contours of ecclesial ethics I shall, initially, outline these two dimensions in turn, beginning with virtue.

Imagine this country, after 65 years of peace, were once again to be invaded and overrun by a foreign power. Imagine there remained pockets of resistance. What would the foreign power do? Most likely it would round up such insurgents as it could find, and torture them until it garnered sufficient information to discover the whereabouts of the rest. And what kind of people would it find most threatening? Probably those who had sufficient convictions, and came from sufficiently deep-rooted communities, that they had a profound sense of their own identity and a confidence that their people would still be around long after the invaders had been sent back or been

assimilated. In other words those whose communities had a character that could not be dismantled by simply picking off individuals.

The painful question for each one of us who are members of churches is, would we, or would any members of our churches, be considered worth torturing? Have we concentrated so much on aligning ourselves with public imagination or developing inner states of the heart that we have lost sight of the communal practices that might constitute a genuine threat to an invader by offering a deeply rooted alternative tradition? Or would we simply be pushovers, ready to accommodate, eager to find influence, personal wellbeing, or a safe place in a dangerous time?

This is what virtue ethics are about. Virtue ethics portray the development of a particular kind of power, known as virtue, which might precisely enable a person or a people to withstand fear and temptation and deprivation and persecution in the face of an invading army. Virtue ethicists examine the “playing fields of Eton” and similar places where character is formed through communal practices shaped over generations in tradition. A practice is a time-honoured activity, integral to a whole way of life, which is not only good in itself, but also training in excellence more broadly. In the 1985 film *Witness*, set in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, the whole Amish community at the center of the film gathers in one place to raise a barn for a young couple who recently married. Raising the barn combines technical skill, communal interdependence, corporate celebration, and a kind of liturgical focus for the village. These kinds of practices create a tradition. A tradition isn't a static inheritance from the past, but a lively ongoing debate about the good, shaped by practices honed over time.

One further dimension of virtue ethics is their teleological character – that's to say, their orientation to a particular goal. For example in 1 Corinthians 14, in his discussion of speaking in tongues, Paul insists that his readers follow the telos that says, “Let all things be done for building up,” that is, for the building up of the congregation. This then provides an index by which the relative merits of a wide variety of activities and expressions may be evaluated. For virtue ethicists, it is hard to see how a vulnerable person may be enjoined to fulfil an onerous commitment without an explicit articulation of a telos. A frequent criticism of liberal democracies by virtue ethicists is that they strive to forge a society without identifying a telos.

The second major dimension of ecclesial ethics is its Christological turn. The term narrative is used in a number of ways in ethics and theology. It can identify the way the agent is inextricably embedded in a network of relationships and commitments. It can also articulate the way in which the self comes to have a coherent identity over time. In these senses narrative is part of the critique of decisionist ethics. Inspired by figures such as Alasdair MacIntyre and John Milbank, it has become fashionable for those involved in ecclesial ethics to trace a historical account, known as a declension narrative, of some kind of a fall from a time when ethics and theology were less problematic to their present impoverished state. But the sense of narrative that is most prominent in ecclesial ethics is that which follows Karl Barth in saying that the narrative of Jesus portrayed in the gospels, and more broadly the narrative of Israel and the church that surround it, preceding and flowing from it, constitutes the definitive narrative in relation to which all of Christian ethics takes shape.

This view is most fully articulated in the work of John Howard Yoder, who demonstrates how the particular details of Jesus' life disclose the elements of Christian social ethics. Yoder identifies the key moment as Jesus' nonviolent confrontation with the powers in Jerusalem. It is what Jesus represented, in contrast to what the violent Barabbas, or the accommodating Caiaphas, or the withdrawing Essenes stood for, that, for Yoder, constitutes the heart of Christian ethics. Thus it is a quick leap from Christocentrism to a commitment to nonviolence. Jesus said, “Love your enemies:” when he listed the details of what this involved, telling his followers to turn the other cheek and bless those who cursed them, he was outlining an ethic that he himself embodied on his journey to the cross. For those like Stanley Hauerwas who seek to combine Yoder's Christocentrism with MacIntyre's virtue ethic, nonviolence becomes the testing ground, because to be a nonviolent community requires profound practices that train disciples in witness that falls short of violent fight or terrified flight.

Such an emphasis on Jesus' ministry and on the ethical significance of his cross and resurrection challenges conventional notions of politics. Now the church, living in the power of resurrection and Pentecost, has the key to a very different understanding of public life. It offers a transformed notion of the past, based around the forgiveness of sins, and a transformed notion of the future, based on the promise of eternal life. Thus Christians can balance the ways they seek to infuse the social order, as salt, or offer an example, as light, knowing that the possibilities of human interaction have been renewed and charted in Jesus.

It's time now to consider some of my own contributions to the field of ecclesial ethics.

## **Improvisation**

The first move I make is to suggest drama is a better notion than narrative for describing the way the Christian story is embodied. The Bible is the neck of an hourglass between the enacted events of which it tells the story, and the embodied response with which the church seeks to respond. While the neck of the hourglass is narrative, the events and the response are both performed: thus drama is a more suitable genre than narrative for understanding the role of the Bible in Christian ethics.

I think of the Biblical drama as a five-act play. Act One is creation; Act Two, Israel; Act Three, Jesus; Act Four, the church; and Act Five, the eschaton. Secular ethics are inclined to assume that they operate in a one-act play, where it is their responsibility to bring about the right outcome. But living in Act Four, the church has an eschatological perspective. The most important things have already happened, in the first three acts, notably the third; and all that is unresolved will be completed by God in Act Five. Many of the wrong turns the church makes can be described as living in the wrong act. For example to live as if the Messiah has not yet come and God's character has not been fully revealed is to live in Act Two; to assume our day is the crucial one and what we do today will determine the future of creation is to live in Act Three; to believe it is our responsibility to make the world come out right is to live in Act Five.

For all the strengths of the metaphor of drama, it is not sufficient. Life continues to present novel and unpredictable challenges that the script does not explicitly allow for. There have been 2000 years of performances of the script, and these must be included in the discernment of faithful embodiment. The idea of a script implies that ethics is about recreating a golden era when disciples once got the story right. All these shortcomings in the notion of ethics as performance can tend towards the church withdrawing from engagement with the challenges of the world – like the slave with the one talent burying it, rather than trading with it, for fear of getting things wrong.

Thus I propose the themes of theatrical improvisation as a way of understanding the practice of Christian ethics. Jeremiah portrays God as a potter who finds the clay is spoiled in his hands and refashions it into another vessel. This is a simple picture of God as improviser, committed neither to discard nor destroy his creation or his people, but to keep the story going through creative adaptation. Scripture offers countless models of improvisation. In particular the Old Testament account of the Exile and the New Testament account of the Acts of the Apostles provide sustained studies in how the people of God may draw on long-practiced habits to act in new circumstances.

“Improvisation in the theatre is a practice through which actors seek to develop trust in themselves and one another in order that they may conduct unscripted dramas without fear.” Improvisation is not about being clever, witty, spontaneous or original. Theatrical improvisers find they have to overcome such urges, which in fact kill the drama. Instead they must learn to be obvious, trust in their learned habits, and trust and enjoy one another. Improvisation may be funny, but it is not thereby trivial or self-indulgent. It is an ordered, skilled and courageous series of practices that offers enormous potential for helping the Church become a community of trust in order that it may faithfully encounter the threatening and the unknown.

There are four broad areas where the training of improvisers has sustained analogies with the character of Christian ethics. The first is the formation of habits. In just the same way as advocated by virtue ethics, improvisation requires extensive immersion in learning to take the right things for granted. Unlike decisionist ethics, it does not assume the actor will spontaneously discern the right

thing to do; on the contrary, only the actor who has long been shaped to be obvious will be able to keep the story going. Improvisers seek to cultivate a relaxed awareness that in many respects resembles what it means to be a person of character.

The second area is that of status. Status draws attention to the element of power and role in every single interaction between two or more people. Much of the dynamism of improvisation arises from its attention to status interactions, and its recognition that every interaction has a status dimension. "Status informs *every single interaction between people* – no casual movement or gesture is without significance. There are no innocent remarks or meaningless pauses. Status interactions are the ways people try to manoeuvre conversations and interplays into forms that reaffirm their preferred mode of relationship. Behind every status interaction is an implicit incipient story, and in many ways status names the negotiation over what kind of story this might become." (88) Improvisers love to begin with conventional scenes, such as a man asking a woman to marry him, or a person undergoing a police interrogation, or a shop assistant advising a customer on a purchase, and then transform those scenes by altering the status each character adopts. The crucial point to grasp is that status is something one *chooses*, not something that is imposed. This is a difficult point to grasp for those whose theological commitments have been oriented toward the liberation of the oppressed. The key to understanding status is to grasp the difference between the status a person *has* and the status that person *plays*. The building in which I used to work had a housekeeper who acted in almost every way as if he were the most senior person in the organisation. The status he *had* was low, but the status he *played* was high. The fascination lay in the difference between the two.

Even the oppressed can play high status, because status is something one *plays*, not something one *is*. In the 1983 film *Merry Christmas* Mr. Lawrence, set in the Far East during the Second World War, prisoner of war Major Jack Celliers is being interrogated by the Japanese camp commander. At one point the commander, relishing his power, and determined to play the highest status possible, says to Celliers, "Do you know what I am thinking?" But Celliers responds, "No. Do you?" an equally high status retort that provokes a predictably brutal reaction. Celliers shows it is perfectly possible to play high status even in the direst circumstances. The expert status player is able to alter status at will to produce the desired effects. When one is aware of a person changing status adeptly, but is enjoying it, one tends to call it charm; when one is not enjoying it, one tends to call it manipulation.

The third area is known as overaccepting. Whenever a dialogue partner says or does anything, whether friendly, hostile, or indifferent, they are making what is known as an "offer." You have three options in return. You may "accept." This means to accept the premise of the offer and let it shape your subsequent interaction. Or, you may "block" the offer, by rejecting its premise. The third is to "overaccept" the offer. This means to accept the premise of the offer but place the offer on a much larger canvas than had been supposed by the person making the offer. A friend was approached by a sex worker who said, "Would you like a good time?" To have accepted would have been to have said, "Yes, how much?" To have blocked would have been to have said, "No, thank you." Instead my friend overaccepted and said, "I'd like to talk to you. I don't think what you're offering me right now is what I'd call a good time. If I can buy you a drink I'd like to talk to you about what I would call a *really* good time." Improvisers seek to train themselves to accept all offers. This seems a terrifying, even foolish commitment. But sometimes blocking is not an option. Sometimes blocking assumes one has access to superior violent force. In many cases violent blocking is futile, even if it seems justified. Overaccepting is especially significant for those who lack sufficient power simply to block threatening offers.

The fourth area is called reincorporation. One influential writer describes improvisation as like walking backwards. Instead of walking *forwards* to face the daunting emptiness of an unknown future, the improviser walks *backwards*, seeing discarded material, near or far, as a host of gifts enabling the continuance and resolution of troubling narratives. Reincorporation comes about when discarded elements from earlier in the narrative begin to reappear, especially at moments when redeeming these discarded elements offers the resolution to what seemed insurmountable problems. Children are often highly attuned to reincorporation, and refuse to believe they have reached the end of the story until elements and characters earlier set aside finally reappear.

Charles Dickens' novels are notable for immense and rapid reincorporation in their closing chapters, where it sometimes seems almost every character in a sprawling narrative comes back into the story in a new way. Act 5 of the Christian drama is entirely made up of discarded elements from earlier parts of the story. This becomes the key motif in Christian eschatology: the study of how God brings back into the story as gift those elements that have previously been suppressed or oppressed as obstacles or superfluous elements.

## **Putting Improvisation to Work**

I want to conclude with some brief reflections on the church in Europe. I want briefly to describe how ecclesial ethics, specifically the four aspects of improvisation I've just outlined, may be helpful. Charles Taylor describes three dimension of this context. The modern Western state and all levels of social interaction, in short, the public square, has been, as he points out, largely emptied of a day-to-day connection to faith in God, and religion is a private matter. Meanwhile Europe has experienced the falling off of religious belief and practice, in people turning away from faith and no longer going to church. In a more subtle and third sense, there has been a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and unproblematic to one in which it is one option among others, and not the easiest one at that. To Taylor's analysis I would add one further dimension. The related cultural, social and religious challenge of Islam in Europe has countered the universality of these secular assumptions in ways that cause confusion and sometimes evoke clumsy and counterproductive responses.

Let's briefly look at what the practices of improvisation may bring to this context. Taylor's first observation, about the disappearance of religion from the public square, is really about status. Think about 1 Samuel 17. David tries on Saul's armor. But in the end he goes out to fight Goliath armed with a slingshot and five smooth stones. Everyone reads this story and loves David, identifies with David, applauds David. But if the churches in Europe love David so much, why are they trying so hard to be Goliath? The story of the church in Europe is that once the church was David. But it became Goliath. It became the overblown, inflexible powerbroker it started its life by evading. That's the first irony of the contemporary church in Europe: it's turning into David, but it doesn't like it. It would much rather be Goliath. In fact it feels Goliath is its natural God-given status. The church is being presented with an opportunity to be faithful like it hasn't been for a very long time, and all it can do is lament. It would be funny if it weren't so sad. If the church could realize it is called to be David, it could reincorporate all those moments in its past that look like faithful, honest failures, and see them for what they truly are: icons of true holiness. Likewise it could reincorporate the faithful, honest failures of Christians in parts of the world where the church is distressed and persecuted, and realise that these pangs of suffering are the seed of the church today. God has given the church in Europe everything it needs to look like David, just not everything it needs to look like Goliath.

But here's the second, even greater irony of the church in contemporary Europe. How did it happen that Christians in Europe lost so much of the respect and trust of people of other faiths and of no expressed faith? It happened by Christians turning Jesus into Goliath. And that's a tragedy. Jesus is not a cosmic or political or cultural bully. Jesus is not Goliath. Goliath is not God. Christians made a terrible theological wrong turn when they started to assume that their role in society was to be in charge, when they decided they imitated Jesus best when they looked like Goliath rather than like David. Right now we're being forced to look more like David but we keep itching to put on Saul's armor. And this is where overaccepting comes in. Status analysis points out the difference between trying to be Goliath and trying to be David. Overaccepting means looking at whether we block and try to be Goliath or accept and lie down as a dead Goliath or whether we overaccept and recognize this isn't about Goliath: we have a chance to become David like we haven't had for a long time and like maybe we should have been all along.

Let's look for a moment at the challenge of Islam. The way this challenge is conventionally configured, Islam is a challenge to the secular state and Christians are so invested in the secular state that they perceive Islam as a challenge to them, too. But this is a sign of just how much the church has lost its identity. Rather than attempting to block Islam, the church should be

overaccepting Islam. That's to say the church should look at the habits in which it has been forming its people. Why are Christians not as distinctive as Muslims, if not more distinctive? Christians stand for democracy and the rule of law and free speech, it seems. But are there not values more fundamental to Christians than that, values in significant tension with those of the secular state? If the heart of the Christian faith is the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection of the body, should not Christians be most famous for practices that reflect those commitments, practices like restorative justice and partnering with ex-offenders, practices like end-of-life hospice care and cherishing those with learning and mobility difficulties, practices like debt relief and reconciliation of warring parties? For generations Christians have been formed to be good disciples of the secular state; but the state was never the church, and being its disciple is at best a distraction, at worst idolatry. Christians seek its welfare, but as an additional activity, not their main purpose. Islam is challenging Christians to rediscover their Christian identity, not as Goliaths dominating the state but as Davids being renewed in the practices and habits of the disciples of Jesus. When Christians say religion is not a private matter, it should not be because they are claiming some right to state power or influence, but because everywhere Christians are combining around issues at the core of their identity and getting a reputation for being found with the least, the last and the lost, and in all the places the gospels suggest Christ most frequently shows up.

Around 15 years ago when I was the vicar of a church with a rather small congregation, a woman said to me, "You know, there are so many things we do here that we couldn't do if we were a larger church." It was a breakthrough moment for me because I'd been pastor there about three years and it was the first time anyone had said that. Previously there had solely been lament that we were not larger like other, proper churches. Like Israel, we too much wanted to be like our neighbors. But the fact that it took three years showed how hard it is for old patterns of thought to die. The church in Europe is locked into denial and lament. If only it could wake up and realize it has an opportunity to be what the church hasn't been for a very long time: a distinctive community whose traditions point to the death and resurrection of Christ and which invites strangers to become companions through the beauty of its life, the love of its members, and the hope of its witness.