Frances Ward


One of the features of public life since the turn of the century has been the popularity of scientists, philosophers and journalists who engage in strident criticism of religion, chiefly on the grounds of its philosophical incoherence and its malevolent political and moral impact. Yet in recent years there have been signs that the tide may be turning. Beginning with Jürgen Habermas’ allusion to a kind of melancholy in late modernity – as he says, ‘an awareness of what is missing’, namely any sort of metaphysical or transcendent commitment to values such as justice, progress and human dignity – a number of well-known philosophers have expressed renewed sympathy with religious world-views, and in particular the capacity of religion to provide humanity with powerful narratives and frameworks of meaning. So, Francis Spufford has returned to the compelling narrative of Jesus of Nazareth at the heart of Christian faith and the surprising consolations to be found in the rhythms of liturgy and spiritual practice. Terry Eagleton has argued that since the Western Enlightenment, philosophers and social theorists have sought in vain to do away with God and install a series of ‘regents’ or humanist surrogates such as Reason, progress or the State, only to see them collapse under the weight of their own contradictions. Roger Scruton argues that we disenchant the legacy of Western art and architecture at our peril, since its capacity to impart a sense of meaning to us is indivisible from its religious content.

Frances Ward’s critique of secularism and her defence of Christianity may usefully be located within this new wave of ‘post-secular’ critics. She joins the revisionists who ask us to think again about the legacy of ‘Enlightenment thinking’ that is responsible for Western modernity as we experience it today and which has ‘shaped the secular soul and, arguably, left Western culture rather brittle’ (p. 1). Secular humanity has become hollowed out and alienated from any sustainable narrative of truth and obligation; but a Christian world view – manifested, importantly, in the practices and institutions of faith, and quintessentially in bodies such as the Church of England – continues to offer a compelling account of what it means to be human.

Ward draws a little on Charles Taylor’s analysis of the secular, in which he argues that modernity has deprived people of a transcendent understanding of self, history and society. There is no longer a supernatural horizon against which our moral lives are grounded and directed. It is a matter, Taylor argues, of a reorientation of what he calls the ‘social imaginary’ away from transcendence towards immanence. However, it is not as though we can ‘dis-invent’
modernity and return to an era in which religion would be, once more, pre-
dominant. The task – strategic and apologetic – becomes then how to defend
the enduring significance of religion, in terms of its skill at safeguarding per-
sonal well-being and its unique facility to embody significant levels of social
capital within civil society when society has already become functionally secu-
lar. The danger is, of course, that this becomes an instrumentalist defence, or a
form of functionalism, similar to that favoured by political leaders who con-
sider religion as an effective source of social cohesion or moral discipline.

As an antidote to such instrumentalism, Ward commends worship (and its
sibling, play) as a reminder of the mystery and grace at the heart of the Gospel.
Her other significant conversation partner is the fictional character of Isabel
Dalhousie in the novels of Alexander McCall-Smith, who punctuates Ward’s
philosophical and historical analysis with insights that speak above all of the
importance of self-knowledge and wisdom as qualities learned and cultivated
in relationship and community with others.

Written in the shadow of the 2011 urban riots and the euphoria of the 2012
London Olympics, Frances Ward’s core thesis is that the Enlightenment mind-
set has left three ambivalent legacies: individualism, instrumentalism and
‘identity’. All of these have formed us as persons in particular ways, but to the
detriment of our ‘souls’. By contrast, Christianity is corporate, finds meaning in
transcendence rather than utility, and nurtures a self forged through the culti-
vation of virtue, rather than the dogmatic assertion of rights. This struggle for
the ‘soul’ of Western culture is more than existential: it has huge ramifications
for the well-being of society as a whole.

Parts One and Two of the book consider the origins of the malaise, in the
philosophical legacies of Rousseau, Locke and Hobbes and the liberalism
(social and economic) of the 1960s and 1980s. Rousseau’s insistence on human-
ity’s original goodness and perfectibility resulted in a secular theory of human
nature which elevated human reason as the measure and arbiter of all things.
The long-term legacy of Rousseau’s Romanticism was a creed of personal free-
dom, but at the cost of a culture of individualism and free-market liberalism
that is at the root of our current malaise of atomism and social disintegration.
Ward expresses a preference for the philosophy of Edmund Burke, who insisted
on the natural state of humanity – and the sources of political authority – as
resting in divinely-given tradition rather than the temporal conventions of
personal choice or social contract. Part Three considers the issues more con-
structively, and argues for the virtues of a life grounded in the rhythms of the
Church’s rites and rituals. Part Four closes with consideration of the cultivation
of the virtues as the underpinning of identity. The formation of virtue takes

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