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**Cultivating the Excellent Life:
The Task of Religious Culture and Civilization**
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Summary

Religious leadership (including researchers and professors) and the civil leadership of our societies have a heightened responsibility given the pluralism that increasingly characterizes the West and other parts of the world. Differences which some would use to divide and isolate need to be more deeply understood in order that we may address and counter those who seek to build on divisions and exploit difference. How may we cultivate our capacity for hospitality around difference? What is the capacity of our religious traditions (Muslim and Christian) to nurture the excellence spoken of by the prophet Muhammad (pbh) and Jesus Christ (pbh) in such a way that the gate of justice opens but does not circumscribe, that the virtue of excellence and that excellence only flourishes in the context of the other? Alongside these questions, what are the sources within the civil philosophies that have shaped politics and law that may be drawn into the fore to nurture a healthier civil life where various religious communities and cultures may live together with a hospitable regard for others? And finally, how may we negotiate differences when they become contentious in the public sphere?

The thesis of this paper and the set of questions with which it belongs will also be discussed in connection with recent tragic experiences in Canada, a country that prides itself on its multicultural policy. What has been the accent of this policy? What has it failed to address? How has it failed to take the religious dimensions of human culture seriously and to engage in the kind of education that pulls forward the gifts of religion and the strength of civil philosophies? What avenues may now be opening for the pursuit of excellence both in the relationship between religious communities and in the shared life of the public square?

The work of the eminent Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, including his concept of “reasonable accommodation,” will be engaged as I develop my argument.

On Sunday evening, January 29th, around 7:45 PM, a gunman entered the prayer room of a mosque in Quebec City's Sainte-Foy neighbourhood. His name is Alexandre Bissonnette, a 27 year old student at Laval University studying anthropology and political science. In a matter of minutes six men who had come together for the evening prayer had their lives snatched from them and nineteen others were injured, five critically. Bissonnette was charged with six counts of first-degree murder. Those who died in the precinct of prayer were all Canadians, some having immigrated to Quebec from French-speaking parts of the Muslim world. Abdelkrim Hassane, a civil servant and programmer for the Quebec government, was 41. Mamadou Tanou Barry and Ibrahima Barry had come to Quebec from Guinea. They were not relatives but the best of friends, and were 42 and 39 respectively. Azzeddine Soufiane was born in Morocco and had come 30 years ago as a student to study at Laval University; he was a pillar of the community who devoted considerable time to assisting newly-arrived Muslim refugees and immigrants. Khaled Belkacemi did his initial studies at a polytechnic school in Algiers and then did his graduate work (including a doctorate) in chemical engineering at the Université de Sherbrooke. He was a professor, 60 years old. Aboubaker Thabti, 44, lived close to the mosque, in part so he could pray there frequently.

Thinking About Quebec

Quebec is a French nation within the much larger English-speaking Canada. The large majority of Quebecers have a shared culture and history and a longstanding concern about being swallowed up by the Anglophone culture and institutions of North America. Identity politics has played a prominent role in its political culture for many decades. More recently these fears have fallen on the Muslim communities that makes Quebec their home.¹ In a *Forum Poll* of December of 2016, which surveyed 1304 randomly selected Canadians, four in 10 Canadians expressed some level of negative bias to one or another racial or religious group (Muslims, Asians, Jews, Indigenous, Blacks). In Canada 28% identified Muslims as unfavourable while in Quebec the percentage rose to 48%, while a total of 58% identified one or another group as unfavourable.

To understand why such fear exists we need to consider the historical and cultural landscape of "la belle province." The most recent chapter in this history begins with the Quebec Referendum in 1995. Quebecers were asked to vote "yes" on a vaguely-framed question geared towards initiating the province's separation from Canada. Jacques Parizeau, the 26th Premier of Quebec (1994-1996) and the flamboyant leader of the Parti Québécois that launched the referendum, spoke when the votes were counted and the referendum defeated. His anger bubbled over and he said Quebec sovereignty was lost because of "money and the ethnic vote." This caused a firestorm of debate in Quebec and Canada, and it smoldered down to the 2013 debate in the province on a proposal to implement a "Charter of Secular Values" aimed at stripping religious symbols from public presence. Our federal government and political parties have also fueled the controversy. In the run-up to the 2015 election, Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Conservative party raised the spectre of denying citizenship

¹ In the 2011 Canadian Census the Muslim population of Quebec was 243, 430.

to women who refused to remove their veil in the ceremony in which they receive Canadian citizenship. His party also proposed a tip line to report “barbaric cultural practices”—as if criminal activity was not already adequately covered under Canadian law. Female mutilation and so-called “honour killings” provided the cover for this proposal.² In the current race for the leadership of the national Conservative party a candidate, Kellie Leitch, has proposed screening immigrants and refugees for what she calls “Canadian values” as her chief policy.

This brief account touches only the most recent chapter in the struggle in Quebec regarding its national identity and how society may be shaped so the various cultural minorities may participate as full citizens with a healthy sense of belonging. To appreciate the gravity of this struggle and its various historical echoes it is important to review and remember what has shaped Quebec as it stands now.

Until the Quiet Revolution in the 1960s, Quebec was the last bastion of a traditional society within the settlement communities of North America.³ It was deeply Roman Catholic, with most of its institutions, schools, hospitals, universities, and various other agencies administered by the church. Quebecers had large families, and liturgical time shaped the rhythm of the society. Church attendance was over 90% and the political and religious authorities of the province were deeply entwined. In a very real sense the “French Revolution” did not reach “New France” until 1960, and it was only then that the struggle for some form of *laïcité* rose to dominance. It is this struggle that forms the backdrop to current fears and concerns about the religious life of Muslims having an impact on public life in the province.

In a matter of ten years—from 1960-1970—the face of Quebec changed dramatically. Church attendance dropped into the single digits. The birth rate plummeted to the lowest in North America. Virtually all Roman Catholic institutions that made up the social infrastructure of the province passed into government hands. Two related factors account for the dissolution of the religious culture of Quebec. First, a seventeenth-century form of Catholic

² Prime Minister Stephen Harper and the Conservative Party of Canada were soundly defeated in the Federal election held on October 19, 2015. Many commentators pointed out that much of the Canadian public was disturbed by the policies and attitude they had towards Muslims. The Conservative Party was reduced to 99 seats from its previous 159 while the Liberal Party of Canada won 184 seats of the 338 in the Canadian Parliament.

³ Arthur C. Piepkorn, *Profiles in Belief: The Religious Bodies of the United States and Canada*, Volume I (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1972) is a fine introduction to the history and shape of Roman Catholic institutions in Quebec. The chapter on “British North America” in Kenneth Scott Latourette, *The Great Century in the Americas, Australasia and Africa*, A.D. 1800 – A.D. 1914, Volume V in his masterful work, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, is standard reading. Also see Mark A. Noll’s essay, “Christian America and ‘Christian Canada’”, *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, volume 8, *World Christianities, c. 1815 – c. 1914*, edited by Sheridan Gilley and Brian Stanley (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2006): 359-380. For a more intimate examination of the formation of the religious culture of Quebec see *Marguerite Bourgeoys and Montreal, 1640 – 1665*, Patricia Simpson (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s Press, 1997).

fundamentalism influenced the Roman Catholic Church in Quebec. Cornelius Jansen (+1638) led a restoration movement that garnered large support in France and the lowlands of Europe.⁴ Jansen's dark vision reduced the understanding of God to that of an angry judge, the human nature to depravity and being bound tightly to the rites of the church as the only chance for salvation. A series of struggles over Jansen's doctrine ensued and it was finally judged heretical by Pope Clement XI in his Papal Bull, *Unigenitus*, issued in 1713. But, as always, the church's official banning of Jansenism took time to trickle down into local communities in parts of Europe. Quebec was a long way from Europe and it was here that Jansenism found its last refuge and shaped Catholicism around divine judgement, Catholic institutional privilege, a fear of modernity, and moral absolutism.⁵ The religious life was brittle and the collision course with the modernization of the society was set.

The second factor was the way in which political leadership and power were tightly bound with religious leadership and power. Once the struggle to enter modern North American society was underway this longstanding alliance began to erode. A decisive early example sets the tone: Maurice Duplessis ("Le Chef") was the 16th Premier of Quebec (1936-1939 and 1944-1959). His power was enormous and even reached deeply into the church. In 1940 Archbishop Charbneau (1892-1959) of Montreal, under the influence of the emerging theologies of liberation, became concerned about the fate of miners who had initiated a labour strike in Asbestos, Quebec in 1950. He spoke about the need to resolve the strike that had continued for four months: the workers deserved their due. When his verbal appeals did not move the parties back to the negotiating table he joined the strikers' picket-line, a unprecedented move on the part of a church official. Duplessis called the Vatican and the Archbishop was removed from his see, transferred to Victoria to serve as a hospital chaplain and live out his final days in the community of the Sisters of St. Anne.⁶

The struggle in Quebec took a grave turn in the 1960s. Pierre Elliot Trudeau (1919-2000) took leadership of the Liberal Party of Canada and was elected to Parliament in 1968. He served two terms, 1968–1979 and 1980–1984. One factor that prompted him to run for office was the rise of a militant nationalist organization, the Quebec Liberation Front (FLQ), a separatist Marxist-Leninist paramilitary group that carried out numerous attacks between 1963 and 1970. There were 160 violent incidents recorded, including the killing of eight people and injuring many others. They attacked various symbols of British Canada, blowing up post boxes that had "Her Majesty's Royal Mail" and an image of the Queen displayed prominently on them. When they bombed the Montreal Stock Exchange in 1969 considerable fear gripped the country. In October 1970 the FLQ kidnapped the British

⁴ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition, A History of the Development of Doctrine*, Volume 4, *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984): 374-85.

⁵ Some years ago a colleague of mine who was a scholar of Quebec folk culture commented to me, "the compassionate Jesus Christ was not known in Quebec until 1960. All Quebecers knew was the God of Judgment in the Old Testament."

⁶ A historical drama in two parts, *Charbonneau et le chef*, directed by Paul Hébert explores this moment in Quebec history. It premiered at the Théâtre du Trident, March 1971.

Trade Commissioner James Cross and Quebec's Deputy Premier and Minister of Labour, Pierre Laporte. Both men were symbols of British Canada and Canadian versus Quebec nationalism. Minister Laporte was killed on the 17th of October and his body found in the trunk of a car. Prime Minister Trudeau acted swiftly and invoked the War Measures Act in response to the crisis. Some 497 people were arrested and held without charge. After a brief period 62 were charged and brought to trial.

Prime Minister Trudeau moved to address grievances in Quebec and encourage its modernization. He opened the civil service of Canada to Quebecers by requiring civil servants to be efficient in both of Canada's official languages, French and English. Since relatively few English-speaking Canadians know French compared with the number of French-speaking Quebecers who know English, the national civil service opened many employment opportunities and deepened the identification with Canada in a portion of the educated class in Quebec. Substantial support for social and cultural initiatives flowed into Quebec. Trudeau repatriated the Constitution Act in 1982, bringing it back from England and thereby loosened the bond of British colonialism that had shaped much of our history. Further, he entrenched a Charter of Rights and Freedoms in the Constitution (following its repatriation) that enhanced the Canadian Bill of Rights of 1960.

More recently, in the early days of the twenty-first century several court cases in Quebec focused on the religious practices of its minority communities. The debate on Quebec identity and the place of religious communities and their practices under the law received heightened attention. A Sikh boy was prohibited by the school board from wearing his *kirpan*⁷ to school; the Multani case was resolved in 2006 by the Supreme Court of Canada when it accepted the argument based on freedom of religion and settled in the boy's favour. Young Muslim girls were prohibited from playing soccer and participating in taekwondo competitions until they removed their *hijab*. The Quebec ministry of education closed down a Hasidic Jewish school. Each of these communities requested a "reasonable accommodation" of their religious practices. On January 27th, 2007 the town of Herouville past a "code de vie" which laid out xenophobic and stereotypical guidelines for all immigrants living in their rural community. Mario Dumont, leader of the opposition party, the Action Democratique du Quebec called for fewer immigrants in Quebec and the reinforcement of "Quebec values" including equality of the sexes, democracy, and a deepening of the value associated with Quebec *laïcité*. It was in this context that the Premier of Quebec, Jean Charest, commissioned *The Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Culture Differences*. Two eminent intellectuals, Charles Taylor and Gerard Bouchard, were appointed to the commission and charged with holding hearings across Quebec and describing the current practice of cultural accommodation in order to eliminate confusion about such practices and offer guidelines for future requests for accommodation.⁸ The Commission held forums in 17 places in Quebec and focused its work on the themes of interculturalism, immigration, religion in the public sphere, and Québécois identity. The

⁷ The *kirpan* is one of the five symbols of a baptized Sikh. To remove it from one's person is considered a form of blasphemy.

⁸ Their report may be accessed at <https://www.mce.gouv.qc.ca/publications/CCPARDC/rapport-final-integral-en.pdf>

forums displayed the strong secularist perspective that had emerged since the 1960s along with local communalist concerns largely rooted in fear of social change. The post 9/11 geopolitical context had sowed seeds of distrust towards those who did not reflect “Quebec values,” particularly when they were seen as pushing for the re-emergence of religion in the public sphere.

Bouchard and Taylor argued that French-Canadian identity is a source of cultural wealth but must not monopolize Quebecois identity. The civil identity of the province needs to develop based on mutual aid and open values that are also part of Quebec identity. While individual rights are important, the common welfare must also be taken into account. They proposed a form of interculturalism, distinct from the Canadian idea of multiculturalism.

Interculturalism⁹ accents the exchange between cultural groups using the French language central to the civil coherence of the collective life of all Quebecers. Three norms were identified: (1) Quebec society is democratic and liberal and each citizen has rights and liberty, a liberty only confined when it infringes on the liberty of others; (2) French is the official language of Quebec and it must be the language of education and public discourse, while at the same time respect must be maintained for minority languages; (3) Quebec is pluralistic and thrives on immigration, encouraging all to participate in the civil sphere so that culturally diverse communities can enrich the society. The report also recommends that all religious displays linked to public institutions should be abandoned. Preeminently, public prayers to open the proceedings of political bodies are inappropriate and the crucifix that hangs in the National Assembly ought to be removed.¹⁰

At the heart of the report is the concept of “reasonable accommodation.” This position holds that accommodating religious practice and belief are not inimical to the secular society of Quebec. The wearing of a kirpan or a hijab only enhances the diversity of the community and do not harm anyone; it is unreasonable to ban them as was attempted in many of the recent court cases. Conversely, judges and police officers need to be neutral and be seen to be neutral. If a Jewish judge comes to the bench wearing his *kippah* and presides over a case involving a person of Palestinian origin it is reasonable to question his neutrality. A judge who insists on wearing his kippah ought to recuse himself and another judge appointed to hear the case. The system of open secularism espoused in the report also saw it as unreasonable to forbid all agents of the state from wearing religious symbols, since they have the same rights as other individuals and it is erroneous to assume that a religious person who does not wear religious symbols is more neutral than those who do. Judges and police, given their power and authority, are the only exceptions.

Charles Taylor

Charles Taylor (1931 -) is one of Canada’s preeminent philosophers and political theorists,

⁹ For a consideration of the understanding of “interculturalism” in Quebec see Gerard Bouchard, “What is Interculturalism?”, *McGill Law Journal* (2011) 56:2.

¹⁰ A substantial debate developed over whether or not to remove the large crucifix that hangs in the National Assembly of Quebec. Politicians who argued for the removal of religious symbols from the public square reframed the meaning of the crucifix, saying it was a national rather than a religious symbol. It remains in place.

and his work spans over five decades. His international contribution has been noted by the many prestigious prizes he has been awarded including the Templeton Prize for Progress Toward Research or Discoveries About Spiritual Realities (2007), the Kyoto Prize (2008), and the John W. Kluge Prize for the Study of Humanity shared with the philosopher Jurgen Habermas (2015), and the Berggruen Prize for Philosophy (2016). As I mention above, in 2007 Taylor joined the Quebec sociologist Gerard Bouchard on the Bouchard-Taylor Commission on “reasonable accommodation” with regard to cultural difference in the province of Quebec. The commission was appointed by the Premier of Quebec in response to the racism and Islamophobia that had become a prominent social concern and political issue as the province continued along the path of secularization and received more immigrants and refugees from various countries.

Much of Taylor’s understanding is noteworthy in connection with the thesis of this paper, and so I will briefly map how it unfolds.¹¹ Taylor is an example of the depth of work necessary in calling forth the best of civil thinking both to understand modernity and to lay out pathways for a healthy civil society. In Canada we have a tradition of idealism (including John Watson, Paxton Young, C.B. Macpherson, and George Grant) that Taylor builds on and expands through his engagement of Martin Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Michael Polanyi, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Taylor argues that our understanding of the world comes about against an unarticulated background, an inheritance drawn from both culture and the civil context that shapes our formation.¹² It is this inheritance (or *tradition*, as I would call it) that gives warrant to the representations that make sense to us. The rules we follow are anchored in our “sense of things,” the landscape of our mind and heart that have been incorporated through what Wittgenstein calls the “forms of life.” The forms of life provide both a centre and the horizon for thinking and action. Taylor begins his work by critiquing the various schools of naturalism that dominated the logical positivist movement flowing from Hegel that shaped much of the intellectual project of the twentieth century. He recognizes the range of theories that fall under the umbrella of naturalism and is critical of them because they all hold “the ambition to model the study of man on the natural sciences.”¹³ In his 1964 dissertation *The Explanation of Behaviour*, his project to examine how naturalism was reshaping the humanities and social sciences begins with a critique of the behaviourist psychology of B.F. Skinner. “Interpretation and the Science of Man,” published in 1972, continued this examination as it had affected political science in the work of David Easton, Robert Dahl, Gabriel Almond, and Sydney Verba. He also saw how naturalism was distorting the development of cognitive psychology that had emerged in the face of the critique of Skinner.¹⁴ He then moved on to the distortions resulting from naturalist

¹¹ I have drawn on the excellent and concise summary on “Charles Taylor” by Ruth Abbey in the Britannica Online Encyclopedia.

¹² In 1991 Charles Taylor gave Canada’s prestigious Massey Lectures as part of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s *Ideas* series. It is published as *The Malaise of Modernity* (Concord, Ontario: House of Anansi Press, 1991).

¹³ “Human Agency and Language.” *Philosophical Papers* Volume 1 (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1985): 1.

¹⁴ “The Significance of Significance: The Case for Cognitive Psychology,” *Philosophical Papers*, Volume 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

arguments in “designative” theories of language that were emerging¹⁵ and in the schools of “individualist and utilitarian concepts of selfhood.” This latter examination is discussed brilliantly in his seminal book, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*.

According to Taylor, the concepts of self as human subject are shaped by a set of distinctive strands of modern thought. Human freedom is held in high regard and each person possesses an inner depth--conscious or otherwise--deserving regard and inviting exploration and understanding. The natural world is seen as a source of goodness and an engagement in and with it offers opportunities for a renewed sense of self and of the gift and wonder of life. Modern concepts of selfhood are preoccupied with the question of authenticity and what is necessary for the individual to flourish in the ordinary circumstances of daily life. The suffering of others--including those outside our normal sphere of acquaintances--gives rise to feelings of generosity.

In his study of society Taylor adopts an hermeneutical approach to counter the reductionism characteristic of both right- and left-wing positivist theories that dominated the twentieth century. Human beings are creatures of meaning and it is necessary to take the meanings that human beings give for their actions seriously for the study of society to be fruitful. This is linked to his understanding of the inner depth of human beings and requires the attention of the social sciences. The self exists and can only exist in the context of the social world and the obligations and responsibilities each person has to others. (His emphasis on the social nature of selfhood has led some to identify him as a communitarian.)

The ways in which meaning is at play in societies and cultures varies across time and place. For Taylor this does not lead, as it has for many contemporary theories, to adopt a notion of relativism. Rather, he points to what remains universal for the self, to what transcends the valued particularities to time, place, culture, and language. How human beings understand themselves, their habits of self-interpreting, is a common and significant part of human identity. All human beings have a language through which they engage their relations, including their relationship to their own self. Each person’s identity is made through dialogue with others and its health is dependent on being recognized by others. Human beings seek a sense of purpose that animates their identity. Finally, all human beings exist with some form of moral framework that orients them toward the good and reveals their growth or lack thereof in virtue. The range of goods at work in the self-understanding of each person also requires them to be “strong evaluators,” deciding which good takes precedence in any given situation.

Taylor is both a superb thinker providing us with large ways to consider identity and the social imaginary and a model of what is needed for the excellent life drawing, in his case, on the tradition(s) of thought leading to the modern West. We must strive for a serious engagement and understanding of the uses of philosophy, its gifts and limitations in particular situations and, as Taylor exemplifies, rethinking and drawing ideas together in new ways (albeit rooted in the civil tradition) to address society’s need to enlarge the social

¹⁵ “Language and Human Nature”, *Philosophical Papers* Volume 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985)

imaginary given the new pluralism. The limitations of the Enlightenment experiment have become obvious but can be rethought in ways that enlarge the civil commons. Taylor's involvement in the Bouchard-Taylor Commission is an example of the fruitful work of a public intellectual that takes both the cultural patrimony--in this case that of Quebec--seriously and the importance of affirming cultural difference in order to enlarge the circle of civil belonging and ameliorate the culture of fear.

The Cultivation of the Excellent Life

Beauty is the word that shall be our first. Beauty is the last thing which the thinking intellect dares to approach, since only it dances as an uncontained splendour around the double constellation of the true and the good and their inseparable relation to one another. Beauty is the disinterested one without which the ancient world refused to understand itself, a word which both imperceptibly and yet unmistakably has bid farewell to our new world, a world of interests, leaving it to its own avarice and sadness. No longer loved or fostered by religion, beauty is lifted from its face as a mask, and its absence exposes features on that face, which threaten to become incomprehensible to man. We no longer dare to believe in beauty and we make of it a mere appearance in order the more easily to dispose of it. Our situation today shows that beauty demands for itself at least as much courage and decision as do truth and goodness, and¹⁶

In the study of religion in the West, research and teaching have focused primarily on historical, textual, and theological issues and, at best, on questions of the good and the true. The good that the ancients considered as central to the life of virtue has often been reduced to a consideration of values. The true has not fared any better, and has often been reduced to historical fact. The consequence of the attention to only two of the three transcendentals has been to leave the third sister, beauty, outside the framework of consideration. The triumph of "values language" arises with the advent of capitalism and since capitalism has driven so much of the modern development of Western culture with its particular ways of thinking about progress and development and its narrow notions of what is acceptably good, virtue, so deeply tied to the beautiful, lost its central place within the culture of the West.¹⁷

In the Greek culture of the ancient world the word *arête* (meaning valour and honour) did not refer to surpassing excellence in one aspect of life. Rather, it meant to be excellent in life, what Kitto calls "an all-rounder."¹⁸ Participating in the original Olympic games in just one sport and winning in that sport was absurd for the ancients since excelling at one thing only did not prepare one for a "proper life of a man and a citizen."¹⁹ A Tiger Woods or Michael

¹⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *For the Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), Volume 1: *Seeing the Form*: 18-19.

¹⁷ Navid Kermani, *God is Beautiful, the Aesthetic Experience of the Quran* (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 2015). Kermani has identified a similar issue in how Islam has been studied and provides, in this book, a superb example of reengaging with the place of beauty in the religious lives of Muslims.

¹⁸ H.D.F. Kitto, *The Greeks* (London: Penguin Books, 1991): 172.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 174.

Jordan, an absurd orientation of all life around personal achievement was a misuse of discipline and the deformation of a human person.²⁰ Properly understood, Kitto states, *arête* “implies a respect for wholeness or the oneness of life, and a consequent dislike for specialization. It implies a contempt for efficiency--or rather a much higher ideal of efficiency: an efficiency which exists not in one department of life, but in life itself.”²¹

In English dictionaries several meanings are given to the word “virtue.” The first refers to the moral life, the pursuit of the good. Only when one digs deeper into the word and explores its etymology and its historical uses do we find it used in reference to a “virtuous object” such as a Ming dynasty (1368-1644) vase beautifully made, properly used and treasured and, thus, showing the marks of time. The marks of time and the patina resulting from proper use including cracks and modest chips are part of its beauty. Beauty is not perfection in the normal sense but the perfection that results when the shades of historical experience have added to the wonder of original beauty. And it is this definition of virtue that is central to both Greek and Christian thinking about the human person and what constitutes a life in which virtue--excellence--has come to flourish.

For Werner Jaeger, in his monumental three-volume work,²² education in *arête*, excellence, is necessary for the fulfilment of whatever natural gifts a person may have and more. A simple training in a specific discipline, what the Greeks called *techne*, while of value was not ultimately the point since human beings require community to flourish. The deeper and proper education of the liberal arts, *kalos agathos*, is aimed at the “all-roundedness” of the person, both the flourishing of their gifts and of their understanding and capacity to participate in the life of the public world and seek the health of the common life. This was the pathway to the beautiful life, to excellence.²³

The Apostle Paul (c.5 – c.67) had a Greek education and both the Gospels and his letters to various fledgling Christian communities come down to us in the Greek language and are part of the early Christian conversation between the Greek and Hebrew world. The early communities of the “people of the way,” as the Christians called themselves, were working through the implications of being followers of Jesus Christ and took many and various missteps along the way. In Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi (4:8-9) he writes:

“Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any **excellence** [*arête*, virtue] and if there is anything worthy of praise, consider these

²⁰ David E. Hawkinson, “‘If There is Any Excellence’: An Inquiry into *Arête*,” in *Whatever is Excellent, Essays in Memory of Zenos Hawkinson* (Chicago: Illinois: Covenant Publications, 2001): 12-34. I had the privilege of studying with the historian Professor Hawkinson and of a friendship with his son, the author of this excellent essay. I am indebted to this essay and our conversations over many years for my thinking about virtue.

²¹ Kitto, *The Greeks*, 174.

²² Werner Jaeger, *Paideia, The Ideals of Greek Culture*, 3 Volumes (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957, 1961, 1965).

²³ Hawkinson, 19-20.

things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and see in me, and the God of peace will be with you.”

Josef Pieper tells us that “Virtue is the utmost of what a man can be; it is the realization of the human capacity for being.”²⁴ In the study of religion it is not enough to acquire academic skills and become a master of narrow areas of study. Religious worlds of meaning are not simply fields of study like many other disciplines. Rather, religions have an end to which they point and knowledge and disciplines intent on nurturing the person along the pathway to virtue, the fullness of being. To reduce the study of religion to data about the religion is to miss what is central to the faith and its deep purposes.

Over the last four decades and counting, humanities departments have given a preferential option to those who claim a firm commitment to one of the many current methodological and ideological perspectives. Your chances of an academic position are directly based on your dwelling in one or another of the following silos: post-modernism, post-structuralism, post-colonialism, feminist, and gender studies. Your methodological and ideological *bona fides* needed to be firmly in place to make your way from graduate school to tenure.

Each of these methodological or ideological perspectives is important; each shines a spotlight on a social disease that needs to be addressed. Not one of them alone nor all of them together, however, constitute an education, a perspective large enough to support the intellectual life, much less an excellent life. None of them gives one a place to stand from which to help the public world understand the enormous set of issues unfolding before us. All of them reduce both the questions and acceptable responses to a pre-packaged set of “values,” none of which lift us above the obvious so we can aspire to that which speaks a healing word to both sides of the usually virulent debate on many of the demanding issues of our day. None of them has room for the cultivation of virtue. The prism of values--my values, your values--binds us often in opposition to each other and foreshortens our capacity to think together.

Several years ago my university entered into an exercise to rethink what we do when we teach the young. Most professors wanted ways to avoid teaching and get on with the “real work” of research some of which, when it was published, made for a useful entry in their CV and garnered an annual increment. They argued that at the heart of our work with students was the development of communication skills, “critical thinking” (not to be confused with thinking), researching the facts and evaluating them. I enquired as to why we did not take a little time and consider what had animated the long history of thought and education in the West? Were the three transcendentals of the true, the good, and the beautiful of no accord? While several colleagues later spoke to me about it positively the instinct, and I use that word advisedly, was to let the comment pass. The true, the good, and the beautiful were quaint, archaic, dangerous--something best left aside.

²⁴ Josef Pieper, *A Brief Reader on the Virtues of the Human Heart*, translated by Paul C. Duggan (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991): 9. Also see his superb study, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1965).

In my four decades of teaching I have yet to see the young find something worth living for in a critical ideological perspective. They need virtues large enough to float a life, to orient one towards the future founded on a firm regard for what has been bequeathed to us by Athens and Jerusalem and Mecca--and of course Geneva, Wittenberg, and Canterbury, and the many and varied other cultural and civil centres of our fragile world. Grasping a culture (no matter how small) and a civil canopy (no matter how varied) is so much larger than all the ideological fancies of the last four decades. Why else are we now jumping onto the Indigenous bandwagon? Because a small local culture is larger than any and all of the ideological methods that have colonized the liberal arts?²⁵

The study of the virtues has been central to education in the West throughout most of its history. For centuries Roman Catholic education focused on mastering the history of thought on the good, the true, and the beautiful, and developed spiritual disciplines to engage the transcendentals. That is why those who wished to study theology would first spend a number of years steeped in the philosophical tradition stretching from the pre-Socratics to the present and examine how the ancient Greek thinkers and those who followed in their footsteps formed the context in which Christian culture flourished and highlighted the particular significance of the tradition of Biblical revelation.²⁶ Only after a mastery of philosophy was one considered prepared to study theology and only then invited to think and engage the challenges facing each generation in its particular historical and cultural moment.

The classical form of Christian education began with what is called the Three Theological Virtues: the good, the true, and the beautiful. These were understood as gifts of God central to the human nature. They needed to be apprehended, and the disciplines of thought and of what flows from them cultivated the excellent life. The Four Cardinal Virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance were cultivated through both study and spiritual discipline in the context of a lively faith. This was the heartland of Christian formation and the development of the intellectual who wove together the large patrimony of ideas and the particular and deep insight of thought on the Christian revelation and the ocean of ideas and habits of being--leading over the course of a lifetime to the excellent life.

Such an education furnishes the mind and heart with a rich body of ideas. It provides spiritual disciplines that militate against fear and self-interest and provides ground for the engagement with those who we, at least initially, do not understand. It orients one toward

²⁵ It is an extraordinary curiosity that the very professors and universities that have spent the last five decades putting the axe to the tree of Christian culture and the civil culture of the West are now, out of their spiritual and intellectual anorexia, I fear, jumping on the bandwagon of the study and teaching associated with the Indigenous cultures that were marginalized by the settlement of Canada. Such study is important but it will lead to odd places when those who do it do so based on their own failure to integrate both the culture and the civil canopy that has a foundational place in the development of the West and of Canada.

²⁶ See Paul Tillich's superb essay, *Biblical Religion and the Search of Ultimate Reality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955).

empathy, disciplining the reactions of enmity that often arise when one is faced with the terror of history either in the form of what is emerging in society or with those seen by the political forces of our day as dangerous and other. Both the landscape of ideas and the cultivated spiritual disciplines nurture humility and modesty, the capacity for justice tempered by mercy, an enlarged sense of the wonder of being, and the place of divine grace at the centre of the life of the world. Because this educational orientation holds together the intellectual and spiritual life of the young as the unity of the human person it is the opposite of the kind of ideological education that has become the common diet of so much university education in the modern West.

There are signs that, at least for some intellectuals in the West, the limitations of the ideological preoccupations of the last five decades, has been glimpsed.²⁷ A few have sounded the warning and offered pathways through the ideological colonization of education over the last few decades.²⁸ The gravity of the role of religious studies education large enough to hold a life and to militate against fear and anger could not be more palpable. Would Alexandre Bissonnette have entered the mosque in Sainte-Foy on that fateful day in January or the hundred plus young people who have left Canada to join ISIS done so if they had been invited to consider both the gifts and challenges of the development of the civil society of the West with the appropriate care and depth and graciousness, as demonstrated for us in thinkers like Charles Taylor? Would they have shaped their relationship to others, particularly those they fear, if they had not been deprived of an education that pulled forward into consciousness the thinking and spiritual disciplines that flow from the golden thread of education for the excellent life, a formation in the virtues of the good, the true, and the beautiful, and the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance? Would the landscape of their self-understanding and their stance towards others have anchored their better self in empathy and given them the strength to deeply engage in the pathways of social transformation, in effect calling life from death? We will never know. What we do know is that in both the civil and the religious cultural spheres there is a depth of understanding of the excellent life and what constitutes nurturing our common capacity for engaging others in ways that deepen relationship in which difference is understood as a gift.

Excellence Trumps Justice

²⁷ See *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues, The Uses of Philosophy in Everyday Life*, Andre Comte-Sponville (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996), *Moral Imagination*, David Bromwich (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), and *Ethics and Selfhood, Alterity and the Phenomenology of Obligation*, James R. Mensch (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2003).

²⁸ Many of the essays in Leo Kass's *Being Human, Core Readings in the Humanities* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 2004) explore the place of virtue education in many of the demanding ethical issues of our day. Alasdair MacIntyre has written extensively on these issues. See his *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), *A Short History of Ethics* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966), and, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

Let me give you a final story, a story that speaks of the Prophet Muhammad's (pbh) deep concern to move beyond justice to the kind of excellence that makes all things new. We understand that "the Prophet held one of his Companions, Abu Lubabah, in great esteem."²⁹ He trusted him and put him in charge of Medina when he left for the first Badr expedition. Some time later a young orphan came to Muhammad to complain that Abu Lubabah had taken from him a palm tree that had long been his. The Prophet summoned Abu Lubabah and asked him to explain. Investigations showed that the palm tree did indeed belong to Abu Lubabah. The Prophet therefore judged in the latter's favour. The orphan who had lost his parents at a young age (not unlike the Prophet) now was stripped of what he thought was his sole belonging. Once Muhammad had given his judgement--and no doubt remembering his own vulnerability as a child--he privately asked Abu Lubabah to give the tree to the young orphan. Did he really need another palm tree? The orphan had nothing and he, as a companion of Muhammad, had all he could possibly wish for. Abu Lubabah adamantly refused. He had gone to such lengths to assert his right of ownership and the orphan had gone behind his back to appeal to the Prophet. The desire for justice had veiled Abu Lubabah's heart: "Revelation was to recall, on both the individual and collective levels, the singular nature of the spiritual elevation that makes it possible to reach beyond the consciousness of justice that demands right, to the excellence of the heart, that offers forgiveness or gives people more than their due: 'God commands justice and excellence.'"³⁰

Abu Lubabah was the just owner of the palm tree. The lesson drawn forth by the Prophet is that our shared humanity and our capacity for compassion in the face of the suffering of others also requires us to move beyond the gateway of justice to the excellence of the human heart which can give generously and aid in the healing of others. The Prophet realized that his companion's "almost blind attachment to one of Islam's recommendations, justice, prevented him from reaching the superior level of justness of the heart: excellence, generosity, giving."³¹ We are told that another of the Prophet's companions, Thabit ibn Dahdanah, having heard about the conflict with the orphan negotiated to purchase the single palm tree from Abu Lubabah and then gave it to the boy. Muhammad rejoiced at the outcome. Abu Lubabah then recognized his lack of compassion and asked for forgiveness.

²⁹ For a fulsome account of this incident see Tariq Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet, Lessons from the Life of Muhammad* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007): 133-134.

³⁰ Ramadan, *ibid.*, 133. The quote is from the Quran 16:90.

³¹ Ramadan, *ibid.*, 133.