

"If You Want to Be a Good Person, It Does Matter What You Believe  
Bishop Robert Barron

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A TEAM OF SOCIOLOGISTS led by Catholic University professor William D’Antonio published a survey that received quite a bit of media attention, for it showed that many Catholics disagree with core doctrines of the Church and yet still consider themselves “good Catholics.” For instance, 40% of the respondents said that belief in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist is not essential to being a faithful Catholic. Perhaps the most startling statistic is that fully 88% of those surveyed said “how a person lives is more important than whether he or she is a Catholic.” In a follow up piece in The Chicago Sun-Times, a reporter asked a number of people on the street for their reaction to these findings. One man said, “I’m a very good Catholic because I follow what’s in my heart, more than what the Church tells me to do...”

As even the most casual student of societal trends knows, this sort of cavalier attitude toward doctrine is rampant, at least in the West. I dare say that most people in Europe or North America would hold some version of the following: as long as, deep down, you are a good person, it doesn’t much matter what you believe. The intellectual pedigree of this popular idea can be traced back at least to the eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant, who held that religion is fundamentally reducible to ethics. All other forms of religious life and practice—dogmas, rituals, liturgies, sacraments, etc.—are meant, Kant thought, simply to contribute to upright moral behavior. In the measure that they fulfill this purpose, they are acceptable, but in the measure that they contribute nothing to ethics, they become irrelevant, even dangerous.

I would argue that what is truly dangerous is precisely the bifurcation between doctrine and ethics that Kant inaugurated, and that has become so ingrained in the contemporary imagination. For though our culture rarely admits it, so many of the ethical norms that we take for granted are deeply rooted in very definite doctrinal claims of the Judeo-Christian traditions. When the dogmas are ignored or declared irrelevant, the normativity of the moral claims is, sooner or later, attenuated.

I would imagine that, if pressed, most people in our society would characterize “being a good person” as treating others with love, honoring the dignity, freedom, and inherent worth of their fellow human beings. And most would agree that ethical violations—stealing, lying, sexual misbehavior, infidelity, cheating, doing physical harm, etc.—are correctly seen as negations of love.

But what is love? Love is not primarily a feeling or an instinct; rather, it is the act of willing the good of the other as other. It is radical self-gift, living for the sake of the other. To be kind to someone else so that he might be kind to you, or to treat a fellow human being justly so that he, in turn, might treat you with justice is not to love, for such moves are tantamount to indirect self-interest. Truly to love is to move outside of the black hole of one's egotism, to resist the centripetal force that compels one to assume the attitude of self-protection. But this means that love is rightly described as a "theological virtue," for it represents a participation in the love that God is. Since God has no needs, only God can utterly exist for the sake of the other. All of the great masters of the Christian spiritual tradition saw that we are able to love only inasmuch as we have received, as a grace, a share in the very life, energy, and nature of God.



So far we've looked at the subjective side of love. But what of its object? Why, precisely, are we convinced that our fellow human beings are in possession of rights, dignity, and inherent worth? This conviction has become so ingrained in us, so taken for granted, that we forget how peculiarly theological it is. Every human being, regardless of considerations of race, education, intelligence, strength, or accomplishment, is a subject of inestimable value because he or she has been created by God and destined by God for eternal life. Take God out of the equation, and human dignity rather rapidly evanesces. If you doubt me on this score, I would invite you to look to societies in which belief in a Creator God was not operative. In classical Greece, the society of Plato and Aristotle, only a certain handful of people—aristocratic, virtuous, propertied, and well-educated—were seen as worthy of respect. Everyone else was expected to do as he or she was told. Infants deemed imperfect could be exposed, and a startlingly large number of people were consigned to slavery. And in the secular totalitarianisms of the last century, societies in which God was systematically denied, human dignity was so little respected that the piling up of tens of millions of corpses was seen as an acceptable political strategy—Lenin's "cracking of some eggs to make an omelet."

In our commitment to love and human dignity, we are, whether we know it or not, operating out of a theological consciousness. When the doctrines and practices that support religious consciousness are dismissed—as they so often are in contemporary secularism—the moral convictions born of that consciousness are imperiled. This is the massively important point missed by those who so blithely say, "It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you're a nice person."