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**500th Edition of Radio 4's 'The Moral Maze'**

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*Synopsis & Critique by Revd. Dick Wolff*

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**BBC trailer :** Michael and the panel consider the question “If you do not believe in a set of divinely inspired moral rules, how do you decide right from wrong in a world with complex and competing interests?” We live in an age where there is no longer general agreement on religion and the time when our society was united by a common set of values based on a belief in God is long gone. Is it hopelessly optimistic to believe that Man can create an ethical framework based on a belief in individual responsibility and mutual respect, or are those secular values a much a better guide than any sectarian dogma or religious text? Can a post-religious society be a moral society, and if so, whose morals will we live by?

Michael Buerk : the persistence of fundamentalism demonstrates the persistence of God, despite the protests of atheists. (Ed: equating ‘God’ with ‘religion?’). Can a post-religious society be a moral one?

Michael Portillo : Man invented both God and morality, therefore the answer is ‘Yes’.

Claire Fox : It’s wrong to suggest that religion *can’t* offer moral guidance.

Clifford Longley : even if a moral *individual* doesn’t have personal religious faith, all (inherited) morality has a religious root.

**1st witness : Peter Cave (chair of the British Humanist Philosophers group and author of ‘Humanism, a Beginner’s Guide’)**

Peter Cave : Morality comes from ‘humanity’. Generalising about ‘religion’ isn’t helpful because there isn’t a single religion. And there clearly is morality that doesn’t depend on belief in gods : e.g. morality derived from ancient Greek philosophy, Confucianism . . .

Michael Buerk : but where do our morals come from? Are you saying they are innate in human beings? Study of the most primitive humans suggests that what is ‘innate’ in human beings is to kill strangers. What is this ‘innate humanity’?

Peter Cave : You’re the one introducing the idea of ‘innate’ humanity. It’s also learned behaviour. I wasn’t talking about ‘innateness’, I was talking about ‘humanity’. (Ed: debate difficult to follow at this point).

Melanie Phillips takes over questioning . .

- Peter Cave : I believe we have a ‘sense of compassion’ etc. which derives from our being human, whether innately or not. Morals don’t have to derive from religion, and the evidence anyway is that religions come to different conclusions. Religions make it more complex.
- Melanie Phillips : ‘Humanity’ is a meaningless concept inasmuch as it is also complex and contradictory. Did you or did you not spring fully-formed as a moral human being from the womb?
- Peter Cave : But where are you getting your morality from when you pick and choose what morals to draw from your religious texts? You’re implying that atheists are moral relativists as if religious people weren’t.
- Melanie Phillips : You seem to be able to live in an individualist bubble isolated from your cultural context (and from the learned wisdom of our culture – in our case the Judæo-Christian tradition).
- Peter Cave : But where, really, are you getting your morality from? We humanists really are aware of some key values. Asking where they come from is like asking ‘where do you get mathematics from?’
- Clifford Longley : Well, the idea of a ‘law written on human hearts’ is a religious concept too! (quoting St Paul). But no two people can agree on what their ‘humanity’ is telling them.
- Peter Cave : I agree that there are some moral absolutes; ‘thou shalt not kill just for the hell of it’ might be one. But to say ‘all human life is sacred’ doesn’t give neat answers to questions about abortion, capital punishment etc. Your key values are independent of your ‘revelations’.
- Clifford Longley : Aren’t we moving towards utilitarianism in our society’s ethics, and isn’t utilitarianism (“what is right is what produces the greatest good of the greatest number”) what you are promoting?
- Peter Cave : No, I don’t reduce morality to the ‘greatest good of the greatest number’. There are also important matters of empathy with people, respect for all people, etc.

Clifford Longley : OK, but yours is also an individualistic morality, isn't it?

Peter Cave : No, community – the 'common bond' – is also important.

***2nd Witness : Alister McGrath (Head of the Centre for Theology, Religion and Culture at King's College and author of The Dawkins Delusion)***

Alister McGrath : Can secular morality be sustained without (a) a transcendent morality and (b) accountability? It's not 'what can I get away with?' Accountability is a powerful motivation.

Michael Buerk : You mean scaring people into being good?

Alister McGrath : No, but getting a true perspective in moral decision-making.

Claire Fox : Isn't your accountability really to your fellow human beings? (Ed: implying : why do we need accountability to a 'God' who does not exist?)

Alister McGrath : The trouble is, human beings collude in evading accountability. Witness what's going on in banking at the moment . . .

Claire Fox : But 'accountability to God' has led to pretty contradictory outcomes. The Crusades, for example. Wouldn't it be better to deepen accountability to 'respect for the human'? Accountability to each other, rather than to 'someone' who's not there? (laughter)

Alister McGrath : God is not simply saying 'take care of me'. The essence of the Ten Commandments is social justice : taking care of my neighbour.

Claire Fox : If religion offers so much, why all the moral crises undermining the Church? Hasn't religion lost its moral compass?

Alister McGrath : There is indeed a need for the Church to regain its status as the provider of moral and social capital.

Michael Portillo : This suggests that religion provides no fixed point or stability in the moral debate at all.

Alister McGrath : Stable convictions we have, but applied to changing contexts. Convictions like 'fundamental respect for human nature'.

### ***3rd witness : Evan Harris (Liberal Democrat MP for Oxford West and Abingdon)***

Evan Harris : I can respect religious conviction at the personal level but we accord too much respect to religion in legislation. (Ed: i.e. organised, institutional religion?) Religion has proved itself inflexible and insensitive to changing evidence. If you tie yourself to a religion, and that religion goes fundamentalist, it's hard to tear yourself away from it. (Ed: this is Alister McGrath's point about collusion, isn't it, only applied to organised religion?)

Clifford Longley : This religion/non-religion is a false dichotomy, isn't it?

Evan Harris : Yes, when talking about individuals. But I'm talking about institutions. It is generally a bad idea if religious groups dictate law.

Michael Buerk : But how do you yourself arrive at 'the common good'? (Ed: I think he means 'moral principles')

Evan Harris : Not by rules but by values. Codes are inflexible, hard to change and adapt to new evidence. Values can be enduring. Values – like “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” – a value which predates all religions.

Melanie Phillips : I think our society's values, despite what you say, have their origin in the Judæo-Christian tradition. But anyway, why should 'secularism' dictate law?

Evan Harris : I'm not arguing for a philosophy of secularism or secularist law. I want law to be made by Parliamentarians, some of whom will be people of religious conviction, and that's fine. I'm arguing for a separation of the power of religious groups from the State.

Melanie Phillips : You seem to be suggesting that whereas religion is subjective and biased, only secularism is neutral and objective. Isn't this secularist bigotry?

Evan Harris : Not at all. Atheists can be bigoted, but I'm not arguing atheism. I'm arguing for a moral space in which all viewpoints can be expressed. Secular states (in this sense) have been the most religiously tolerant.

It is theistic states that have proved the most regressive and repressive.

#### ***4th witness : Tom Butler (Bishop of Southwark)***

Michael Buerk : What would be the implication of moving away from morality based on religious culture?

Tom Butler : It's a false question because it's never going to happen. There isn't going to be a culture in which nobody is religious. There will be many different perspectives, some religious, some not. The point is to work together for the common good.

Michael Portillo : Life can be respected in other cultures . . .

Tom Butler : Of course. Religious cultures have a long history of trying to hold it all together by trial and error. Religion offers a story of 'what has worked and what hasn't'.

Michael Portillo : But didn't man invent God, not the other way around?

Tom Butler : Different (Christian) societies have reflected on a common 'holy book' and come to contextual conclusions, trying to move forward together.

Claire Fox : What about the current spat between atheists and religious people?

Tom Butler : I'm always more frightened by people's 'terrible certainties' rather than their 'terrible doubts'. Both those who are fundamentalist atheists and fundamentalist religious.

Claire Fox : But I admire certainties, and I regret the loss of direction they can offer . . .

Tom Butler : Well, we (Christians) have the certainty of the revelation of God in our holy books and in the person of Jesus Christ. Combine that with the richness of 2,000 years of experience and the use of the brains God has given us . . .

Claire Fox : But the Church seems so reluctant to employ a sense of moral judgement. Why has it got such a feeble sense of moral judgment?

Tom Butler : I am making a moral judgment when I say we have to be aware of people's 'terrible certainties' etc. What

religion can bring is an accountability beyond itself . . . and beyond that of the State (Ed: a reference back to Evan Harris's position?)

Claire Fox : It seems to me you share a moral relativism with the atheists.

Tom Butler : No, because ultimately my morality stems from one place – the person of Jesus Christ.

Michael Buerk : Who are the new priests, in your view?

Tom Butler : (Ed: misunderstanding the question as being about priests in the Christian sense, when Buerk means 'priests' of the new post-religious morality?) All sorts of people working for the common good and getting inspiration from religious faith; getting the grace and inspiration to live out that life.

### ***Concluding discussion***

Michael Buerk : I want to know whether morality based in religion is more immutable, absolute.

Michael Portillo : "Thou shalt not kill" is a pretty good absolute, but you don't need religion to arrive at that (*implied*).

Michael Buerk : You were Minister of Defence, weren't you? (*laughs*)

Claire Fox : Our religious speakers seemed as relativist as the non-religious, which proves my point that we're wrong to try to see them as two opposing camps . . .

Michael Buerk : . . . in which case, a religious morality has no greater traction than a non-religious one. (Ed: thereby 'reinstating' the 'two camps' idea)

Clifford Longley : We're conducting the world's greatest experiment in seeing how long we can last without renewing society's moral deposit. We'll end up with chaos (and cites the chaotic morality of sink estates as a sign that it's beginning to happen).

Michael Portillo : There simply isn't the evidence for the existence of God, and therefore to base our morality on it is an immature thing to do.

Melanie Phillips : It's a muddle. There aren't neat 'religious' and 'non-religious' camps any more because religious

people are influenced by secular relativism. (*Ed* : my understanding is that she argues the need to get back to the 'Judæo-Christian' – her phrase – tradition; a classically conservative position).

Michael Portillo : So you would prefer a society in which there was no muddle, but we were imprisoning homosexuals?

Melanie Phillips : What we have at the moment is a 'me' society, we are seeing the devaluing of human life at both ends of its cycle, creeping utilitarianism . . .

Claire Fox : My beef is with secularist philosophers who are failing to develop a secular morality. Evan Harris's 'evidence-based morality' has no imaginative depth at all; it closes down the capacity to have any real moral reasoning. "Science says this so we have to do this . . ." is a cop-out, morally. There's no point having an argument with religious people (*implied*: secular philosophers need to be constructive : work it out for themselves)

Michael Portillo : Rationality is the basis of everything. It invented religion. The Ten Commandments were written by human beings, out of reasoned thinking. Somebody thought them up.

Melanie Phillips : Rationality versus religion is a false dichotomy. Rationality figures very highly in the Judæo-Christian tradition. In fact, in our post-religious age we have become an extremely *irrational* society – paganism, witchcraft, para-psychology, séances . . . (*voice from audience* : "virgin births". *Laughter*)

Claire Fox : Being moral isn't about 'doing what you think is right'. It's about rediscovering moral agency. It's a collective project that nonetheless requires putting the individual at the heart of it. The Ten Commandments are a fine starting point : they're simple, 'off-the-shelf', easy-to-apply principles.

## Critique

Michael Portillo fails to recognise that any god that humans can ‘invent’ cannot *by definition* be the God of the Bible, but is, *by definition*, an idol (*i.e.* a product of human imagination, given ultimate value). Certainly that means that much religion *as actually practised* is ‘idolatrous’ in this sense, but if we’re looking for the fundamental principles – the ground – of morality, he’s just evading the issue. He accords ultimate authority to human ‘rationality’ (which itself needed careful definition – does that include religious sensibility and experience?).

Both he, Peter Cave and Claire Fox suggest that ‘religion’ doesn’t offer a fixed reference point and its morality is therefore relativist and unstable. But the ‘fixed point’ (which for Melanie Phillips and Clifford Longley seems to be ‘the collected wisdom of the Judæo-Christian tradition) is *God*. Not religion, which is humanity’s attempt to *respond* to God. That God – ‘Ultimate Reality’ – is a fairly elusive ‘fixed point’ doesn’t undermine the case that *God is* a fixed point. At the very least, it suggests that any attempt to discover ‘morality’ without reference to ‘Ultimate Reality’ (= God) is doomed to relativism, and possibly worse. As Alister McGrath noted (in response to a different charge) it’s about ‘perspective’. ‘Terrible Certainty’ about the *nature* of Ultimate Reality (= God) is equally doomed and potentially dangerous. But denial of the prior nature of Ultimate Reality is incoherent (it’s as good as saying “I don’t believe in reality”).

Alister McGrath recognises that human beings ‘collude’ in evading accountability and Claire Fox points out that organised religion has also been pretty good at evading its accountability to God (although the worst examples of Christian immorality have resulted not from evading accountability to God but from the ‘terrible certainty’ of those who presume to know God’s mind). The capacity of human societies for self-deception, ‘idolatry’, is a point well made – but this is true regardless of religious beliefs or behaviour, conventionally defined.

Evan Harris is refreshingly clear about religion : he’s only really interested in religion as an identifiable social phenomenon. His is the politician’s pragmatic desire to hold competing interests in balance, working (as Tom Butler seeks to do) for the common good. Melanie Phillips betrayed an over-zealous paranoia in accusing him of secularist bigotry, although there are indeed noisy secularist bigots around who cannot see that religions have anything to contribute to moral debate. However, Claire Fox is right to point out that such moral pragmatism is

imaginatively empty and lacking in substance or fundamental principles. She wants some fundamental certainties : but whether there are any fixed points other than ‘God’ (= Ultimate Reality) I very much doubt.

Tom Butler, though terribly ‘churchy’ and seemingly woolly, does put his finger on something important. His citing of ‘our holy books’ as sources of certainty is a bit dodgy. Peter Cave rightly questions by what principles Christians choose which commandments in the scriptures to treat as timeless and which as ‘of their time’. The meaning of the ‘holy books’ is actually almost as elusive as God himself. Peter Cave fails to recognise that although it’s true that many Christians do pick and choose which bits of the Bible to obey, this is wrong : the Bible has to be taken as a whole : that is, with all its internal contradictions and anachronisms. Its authority is that it gives us a *language* (of ‘God’) with which to engage with e.g. questions of morality. The authority is such as to say ‘you cannot bypass this language, these concepts, this story’. But just because King David indulged in ethnic cleansing doesn’t mean we can.

The most important thing that Tom Butler puts his finger on is ‘the person of Jesus’, whom he cites as a ‘certainty’, a fixed point in the moral debate.

Whereas . . .

- for Michael Portillo, the fixed point is ‘human rationality’ (whatever that means). This is no real answer to anything – dangerously woolly.
- for Peter Cave, the fixed point is some sort of balance between the common good, ‘empathy’ (with whom?), the greatest good of the greatest number, ‘humanity’ (whatever that means) – with no clear defining principle to adjudicate on the right balance between these. It’s a muddle-through morality, with no clear principle or even focus.
- for Evan Harris, the fixed point is the authority of the State and some ‘enduring values’ coupled with scientific evidence (inasmuch as he developed his argument – he would probably have more to say on this)
- for Clifford Longley and Melanie Phillips, the fixed point seemed to be the inherited wisdom of the tradition. In Melanie Phillips’s case the “Judæo-Christian” tradition, a term which interestingly excludes the other (particularly significant at present) Abrahamic faith – of Islam. All three Abrahamic religious traditions can be described as ‘ethical monotheism’.
- for Claire Fox, there is no fixed point, but she wishes there were. God doesn’t come into it because God (*i.e.* Ultimate Reality) doesn’t exist. That being the case, her ‘fixed point’ is likely to remain non-existent also – and that’s not to make a ‘religious’ statement.

- for Michael Buerk, the fixed point either has to be ‘religious’ or ‘non-religious’, because despite all four witnesses objecting he can’t see that this is a false dichotomy. (Interestingly, his panellists, with the exception of Claire Fox, seem to share his either/or view, which raises interesting questions about the balance of the panel).
- Alister McGrath alone introduces the ‘fixed point’ dimension of ‘transcendence’ and ‘true perspective’, which, surely, must lie at the heart of any ‘religious’ approach to moral thinking – but which is by no means restricted to conventionally religious people (*i.e.* signed-up members of religious groups). He also is the only one to pinpoint human propensity for self-delusion and evasion of truth (although doesn’t do it very clearly). Tom Butler makes a passing and somewhat obscure reference to the ‘person of Jesus’ who, in the Christian tradition at least, is the practical point of reference when attempting to talk about the otherwise-evasive transcendent God.

Claire Fox suggested that the Ten Commandments are a down-to-earth, “off-the-shelf”, easy to understand and apply working guide to morality. But none of the speakers drew attention to the first two key ‘commandments’, despite the fact that these are the key commandments from which all the others flow. It is not possible to think morally in the Abrahamic traditions (which account for the vast majority of the world’s religious followers) without reference to these two commandments – and yet none mentioned them!

These are (1) ‘you shall have no god but me’ and (2) ‘you shall not worship idols’. (Exodus 20 : 3 - 5; Deuteronomy 5 : 7 - 9). Although critics often suggest that this portrays God as a petty jealous despot – and much of the Hebrew scriptures seem to endorse that conclusion – this is to miss the point. God (who in the Hebrew tradition is utterly transcendent, whose name is obscure and not to be pronounced) is *by definition* that single transcendent point of convergence in Reality on which all other realities – including the gods – depend. The Hebrews (and the early Christians) were thus atheists in the conventional sense : they didn’t believe in the gods. The second commandment thus elaborates : you are not to worship gods that you have conceived. Any god that is a product of your imagination (*i.e.* ‘god’ as defined by Michael Portillo) is an idol, and you must not give it ultimate value.

The other ‘elephant in the room’ that nobody talked about was Jesus, yet the core Christian story of the crucifixion and resurrection of the ‘Messiah’ is the fixed point around which moral thinking revolves – and (as I shall argue) it is closely related to the first two commandments. The fundamental answer to the ‘fixed point’ in Christian moral thinking

is found in the myth of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection (whether you believe in these as historical events is a matter of personal conviction, but even if it remains for you a parable the story nonetheless holds the key).

The Apostle Paul is one who realises the crucifixion's full moral significance, and since 'Christianity' in European culture is largely 'Paulianity', his insight is very much part of our inherited moral wisdom.

For Paul, 'sin' distorted genuine, well-meaning moral/religious conviction ('the law' or 'the commandment') such that it 'killed God'. The moral law, which was given to unearth 'sin' and make it visible so that it can be dealt with, was in itself good; but through (his and others') religious zeal it nonetheless ended up killing the 'perfect good' – Jesus. Somehow, therefore, the moral code had got corrupted by those who most studied and revered it – but to call the agent of corruption 'sin' (as Paul does) does little more than give it a name. Sin is quite an obscure concept in Paul, because whatever Paul's 'sin' is, it very obviously does *not* equate to breaking moral/religious codes – even moral/religious codes given by God. Indeed, it was zealously adhering to moral/religious codes that gave 'sin' free reign and led to the death of the good. (The discussion appears in condensed form at Romans 7 : 6 to 8 : 6). Thus there is a very great caution about moral/religious codes at the heart of Christianity. Even though they may have a good purpose they are corruptible – they can do damage even in their observance. Christianity is therefore not a moral code so much as a wariness about moral codes – 'the good' is understood in the shape of a person – Jesus – not a moral code (as Tom Butler indicated).

But other early Christian voices add other layers of significance to this story. One such is that the death of Jesus the 'Son of God' establishes him as the High Priest to fulfil the high priesthood for eternity (e.g. Hebrews 5 : 1 - 10 and 8 : 1 - 6). (Recent research is suggesting that this may in fact have been Jesus's own self-understanding). A core function of the high priesthood was to offer the sacrifice in the atonement ritual. The significance of Jesus is therefore : no further sacrifice is needed to establish 'holiness' (roughly equivalent to a 'state of virtue' – holiness is both a moral and spiritual state). As the Christians argued, Jesus through his sacrifice (substituting himself for the key Temple animal sacrifice) 'destroyed the Temple' which was raised again in his own body (see John 2 : 19 - 21). This is of course a somewhat obscure metaphor in 21st century Britain, but the Temple is a metaphor for much conventional religion, which is configured around appeasing gods of one sort or another. It is arguable, therefore, whether Christianity should even consider itself a 'religion' in the conventional sense.

Bringing these insights about transcendence, idolatry, 'sin' and sacrifice together, it is reasonable to argue that 'sacrifice' is what results when 'law/commandment' becomes an 'idol'. The transcendent 'point of convergence' in reality ('God') is beyond moral law, as the mountain in the distance is beyond the stained glass window through which we look. Fixation with the window (moral law) leads in the end to idolatry, and onwards to sacrifice of the innocent. The reverse corollary is that 'if you see systems requiring sacrifices – especially living sacrifices – be suspicious. Somewhere there is probably idolatry going on.' There is nothing relativist in this – Claire Fox is quite wrong. In fact, in this understanding all the speakers views converge :

**Michael Portillo** and **Claire Fox** are not being asked to base their moral thinking in a god that humans have invented, but in 'reality'. Even if their dependence on rationalist thinking denies them the opportunity for a more spiritual life, and they can only appreciate the crucifixion/resurrection as a myth with no historical basis, they can nonetheless deploy the *theoretical concept* of God as a mathematician might deploy the concept of 'infinity' in order to work out their moral equations, which would certainly enable them to root out idolatry : a sort of moral *via negativa* – identifying 'the perfect' by process of elimination : rooting out the 'less than perfect' (*i.e.* the idolatrous). This isn't so far removed from the philosophical thinking of some of the ancient Greek philosophers, I think.

**Clifford Longley** and **Melanie Phillips** can draw their moral insight from their respective inherited traditions, as long as they recognise that religious/moral traditions can themselves become idols (leading to xenophobia and religious bigotry) and, being traditions, need to evolve – but then the Abrahamic faiths do carry within them the 'antibodies' that can sniff out idolatry. (They must do, otherwise they could not have survived the centuries.) It's a pity that the process of recognising idolatry is so underdeveloped in these traditions. This is probably because of their reluctance to recognise the real influence of (lesser, 'man-made') gods at all, and therefore their propensity for confusing gods with God.

**Michael Buerk** can free himself from the religious/non-religious blind alley and dig a bit deeper into questions of Truth, which reach beyond sociology. Where religion takes pride in setting itself up against non-religion it is likely to be idolatrous, anyway. This should also bring some comfort to **Evan Harris**, who might also keep an eye open for the secular state becoming an idol in itself. The first signs of that are innocents being sacrificed to pseudo-moral/spiritual crusades like (for instance)

‘wars against terror’ or abuse of human rights according to the doctrine of ‘national security’.

**Peter Cave** would have a yardstick for critiquing the application of the apparently random key values he wasn’t able to articulate (because he wasted most of his available time pointing out the apparent incoherence of ‘religious’ morality) without having to ‘believe in gods’ – because fundamentally the Abrahamic ‘faiths’ don’t believe in gods, either.

**Alister McGrath** could articulate the idea of accountability to a transcendent Reality without giving the impression of needing to appease a wrathful deity through good works – which I’m sure wasn’t what he meant to imply. It’s not about appeasing a wrathful deity (as the crucifixion/resurrection story indicates) : it’s about recognising that idolatry of whatever form inevitably results in repressive and even violent consequences – that’s just how it is.

**Tom Butler** would be better able to move out of what sounded like a churchy enclave and recognise that whereas God has no further use for a priesthood vested permanently in special individuals (Jesus having been the priest to end all priesthood of that sort) the gods still have their priests – the financial wizards that create obscure financial instruments that end up demanding sacrifices, the mercurial demagogues of the media, mediating ‘truth’ to the masses for profit (which sacrifice honoured celebrities on its altar just as Aztec sacrificial victims supposedly considered it an honour to have their hearts ripped out), the ‘my country right or wrong,’ ‘ours is not to reason why’ brigadiers, the pornographers, the drug dealers and all the others who sell dreams that can’t deliver.

## ***Conclusion***

It was Alister McGrath and Tom Butler (and maybe, to a lesser extent, Claire Fox) who took the debate closest to the centre of the ‘moral maze’; although in fact it is a centre around which the generations only ever spiral, addressing the same essential questions in every generation and only maybe inching a little closer. For the most part, the debate was lost up deviations and blind alleys largely as a result of confusing God with religion, and with ‘the gods’.



