THE COMMON GOOD AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

DAVID HOLLENBACH, S.J.

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CHAPTER ONE

The eclipse of the public

Over two millennia ago, Aristotle set the challenge this book will address. Aristotle's aim was to discern fitting goals for a good human life. At the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics* he argued that a human life can be judged good when it is shaped by a relatively consistent pursuit of ends that are themselves good. Thus much of Aristotle's moral reflection was devoted to determining the nature of the good that people should seek. On this basis he wanted to specify what lifestyles can be called genuinely good patterns of living. His entire understanding of morality was built upon this conviction that a good life is one devoted to the pursuit of good purposes or ends.

One of Aristotle's most significant conclusions was that a good life is oriented to goods shared with others – the common good of the larger society of which one is a part. The good life of a single person and the quality of the common life persons share with one another in society are linked. Thus the good of the individual and the common good are inseparable. In fact, the common good of the community should have primacy in setting direction for the lives of individuals, for it is a higher good than the particular goods of private persons. In Aristotle's words,

> Even if the good is the same for the individual and the city, the good of the city clearly is the greater and more perfect thing to attain and to safeguard. The attainment of the good for one person alone is, to be sure, a source of satisfaction; yet to secure it for a nation and for cities is nobler and more divine.[1]

[1] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094b. This is an adaptation of Martin Ostwald's translation (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962). The Greek *polis* is translated "state" by Ostwald, but "city" has been used here to avoid the impression that Aristotle is speaking of the good of

Aristotle wrote these words in a context of the Greek city-state (the *polis*), a social and political form quite different from the modern nation-state. So it is not immediately evident what the interdependence of the good of the individual and the common good would mean in the contemporary context. It is clear nonetheless that Aristotle envisioned the larger good realized in social relationships as superior to the good that can be achieved in the life of a single person considered apart from the community.

Indeed Aristotle spoke of the common good realized in community not only as nobler but as "more divine" than the good of persons considered one at a time. This religious dimension of the common good has been echoed throughout much of the later history of Christian reflection on morality, politics, and what is called spirituality today. For example, Thomas Aquinas's discussions of Christian morality often cited Aristotle on the primacy of the common good in the moral life. Aquinas's *Summa Contra Gentiles* reaffirmed Aristotle's statement that the good of the community is more "godlike" or "divine" than the good of an individual human being. Aquinas went on to identify the good to be sought by all persons in common with the very reality of God. St. Thomas wrote that "the supreme good, namely God, is the common good, since the good of all things depends on God."[2] Thus the good of each person is linked with the good shared with others in community, and the highest good common to the life of all is God's own self. For Thomas Aquinas, therefore, the pursuit of the common good carries out the Bible's double commandment to love God with all one's heart, mind, and soul, and to love one's neighbor as oneself.

This centrality of the common good in Christian life was echoed by Ignatius Loyola at the dawn of modernity in the sixteenth

the modern nation-state. Identification of the common good with the good of the modern nation-state can have totalitarian implications that any use of Aristotle today must avoid. Also "person" is used where Ostwald uses "man." Both of these departures from Ostwald's translation point to the difficult problems that must be addressed in making a normative argument for the viability of the notion of the common good today. These problems will be addressed throughout this book.

[2] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, III, 17. Again, the translation has been adapted, using "God" rather than "Him," from that contained in *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Anton C. Pegis, 2 vols. (New York: Random House, 1945), vol. II, p. 27. Adaptations in the interest of gender inclusiveness will be made as appropriate in citations throughout this book.

century. Ignatius harked back both to Aristotle and to Aquinas when he set forth the spirit that should govern the Jesuit order he was founding. He wrote that all the decisions of his followers should seek the broader, common good, rather than goals that were less comprehensive in scope. In the document that lays out his founding vision of the Jesuit order, Ignatius stated that "the glory of God" is the goal that should energize all of his followers' activities. But he immediately linked God's glory with the terrestrial reality of the common good. Indeed the *Formula of the Institute* of the Jesuit order came close to identifying the two ideas when it said that all of the order's activities should be directed "according to what will seem expedient to the glory of God and the common good."[3] This single phrase sums up much that is central to Ignatius Loyola's religious vision.

For the first Jesuits the pursuit of this vision of service to the common good included obviously religious ministries, such as the defense and propagation of Christian faith, preaching and other ministries of the Word of God, and the administration of the sacraments. But it also included tasks that might appear more secular, such as the education of youth and the illiterate, reconciling the estranged, and compassionate assistance to those in prisons or hospitals.[4] Such pursuits were mentioned by Ignatius simply as examples of ways toward the common good that he identified with manifestations of God's glory on earth. So for Ignatius the pursuit of this-worldly aspects of the common good was an eminent responsibility of Christians and closely linked with their vocation from God.

Ignatius Loyola's vision of the common good was extraordinarily expansive in scope. Indeed he saw it as *universal*, extending well beyond the city-state envisioned by Aristotle, the medieval kingdoms of Aquinas's understanding or the Renaissance republics closer to his own time. Ignatius saw the common good as the good of the

[3] This identification can be found in the apostolic letter of Pope Julius III, *Exposcit debitum* (July 21, 1550) that gave papal approval to the "formula of the Institute" of the Society of Jesus. It is contained in the contemporary normative documents of the Jesuit order, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and Their Complementary Norms, A Complete English Translation of the Official Latin Texts* (Saint Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), 1. Formulas of the Institute of the Society of Jesus, Julius III, no. 1, p. 4.

[4] See John W. O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 5, 163–192.

whole of humanity, extending to the ends of the earth. The phrase "the more universal good" appears repeatedly in the *Constitutions* of the Jesuit order as the criterion for decisions in the service of God and the church.[5] This vision of the more universal common good made Ignatius's first followers among the first Westerners to travel beyond the boundaries of the Europe familiar to most previous Christian thinkers. It led them to encounters with the cultures of India, China, and the Americas that had been inaccessible and even unknown. In these missions they sought to bring both the gospel and European knowledge to these cultures. In their encounters with these societies they predictably manifested the same prejudices as their European contemporaries. But in some notable instances they rose above these biases with appreciation for the high achievements of these cultures, seeking to learn as well as to teach.[6] This was evident in their work of constructing the first grammars and dictionaries for Europeans of the newly encountered languages and in their often controversial adaptations of Christian doctrine and worship in light of indigenous religions. Thus echoing Aristotle but going well beyond him by stressing the scope of the common good, Ignatius wrote that "the more universal the good is, the more it is divine." Therefore Ignatius's followers were to choose ministries that gave preference "to persons and places which, once benefited themselves, are a cause of extending the good to many others."[7] At its best, this pursuit of the more universal common good was not simply envisioned as the one-directional transfer of the European vision of the good life to non-European societies. It was to be characterized by an exchange among understandings of what truly good lives could look like.

This brief historical sketch indicates that service to the common good was central to the normative vision of the good life through

[5] For example, in *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, nos. 618 and 623. See John W. O'Malley, "To Travel to any Part of the World: Jerónimo Nadal and the Jesuit Vocation," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 16, no. 2 (1984).

[6] On the exchanges between the early Jesuits and non-European cultures, see Jonathan D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York: Viking, 1984); Andrew C. Ross, *A Vision Betrayed: The Jesuits in Japan and China, 1542–1742* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994); John W. O'Malley, Gauvin A. Bailey, Steven Harris, T. Frank Kennedy, eds., *The Jesuits, Cultures, Sciences, and the Arts, 1540–1773* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

[7] *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, no. 622.

much of Western thought, from classical Greek moral philosophy, to medieval European Christian theology, to a form of early modern Christian spirituality in its initial encounter with the global realities that have become so central in contemporary consciousness. Oddly enough, however, one rarely finds a definition of the common good in these earlier sources, despite the fact that the concept was so central for them. We can, however, give a general description of what the term often meant to them by contrasting it with several terms that are currently in use.[8]

The common good for these earlier authors was clearly different from the largely economic and utilitarian concept of the general welfare. The notion of general welfare, as ordinarily understood today, sums up the economic welfare of the individual members of the society into one aggregate sum. The gross national product, for example, is frequently taken as an indicator of the general welfare in this way. As has often been noted, however, this kind of utilitarian standard pays little or no attention to how this overall sum is distributed among the members of the society. Indeed the GNP could be growing at a rapid pace while some members of society grow poor or fall into destitution. This general welfare thus need not be *common* to all the members of society. This aggregative good can increase while the well-being of some or many of a society's members declines.

The concept of the public interest is often used today as an alternative to this aggregative notion of general welfare. The idea of the public interest builds upon the modern commitment to the fundamental dignity and rights of all persons. Protection of these rights is thus seen as in everyone's interest. Public institutions and policies that will secure these rights for all persons are thus seen as helping realize the interests of everyone. Understood this way, the public interest is a disaggregative concept. It breaks down the public good into the effects it has upon the well-being or rights of

[8] I here rely in part on the helpful discussions of the meaning of the common good in Patrick Riordan, *A Politics of the Common Good* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 1996), esp. chap. 10. See also Drew Christiansen, "The Common Good and the Politics of Self-Interest: A Catholic Contribution to the Practice of Citizenship," in Donald Gelpi, ed., *Beyond Individualism: Toward a Retrieval of Moral Discourse in America* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), pp. 54–86.

the individuals who make up society. Thus, it too lacks the richer understanding of the common that is implicit in many of the authors who shaped the premodern tradition of the common good.

The recently revitalized idea of "public goods" is perhaps the closest contemporary analogue to the idea of the common good in more classical sources. A public good can be described as a good that is present for all members of a relevant community if it is there for any of them. More technically, it is "non-rivalrous in consumption." This means that the enjoyment of this good by some people does not mean that it cannot be enjoyed by others. A beautiful sunset or a clean environment does not become unavailable to one person because it is being enjoyed by someone else. Second, a public good is "non-excludible." Its benefits cannot easily be confined to just some people by excluding others from these benefits. The clean air of a healthy environment, for example, is not like bottled oxygen that may be available to some but not others. If it is there for all, it is there for everyone; if it is present for anyone, it is present for all.[9]

The concept of public goods, however, lacks an important element present in earlier conceptions of the common good. These public goods are largely seen as extrinsic or external to the relationships that exist among those who form the community or society in question. This is easiest to see when the community is an intimate one like a family. The goods shared in a family include the house they live in and the income they share. In a family that is functioning well, these goods are non-rivalrous in consumption and non-excludible. But there is more to a good family or friendship than the sharing in such extrinsic goods. The relationships of concern or affection among siblings and friends go deeper than the sharing of such goods. These positive relationships are, in fact, preconditions for such sharing. There are analogies to relationships of this sort in less intimate societies like cities or states, where the relationships are better characterized by the presence or absence of mutual respect. The quality of such relationships among a society's members is itself part of the good that is, or is not,

[9] For a concise discussion of public goods, see Inge Kaul, Isabelle Grunberg, and Marc A. Stern, "Defining Global Public Goods," in Kaul, Grunberg, and Stern, eds., *Global Public Goods: International Cooperation in the 21st Century* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 2–19.

achieved in it. One of the key elements in the common good of a community or society, therefore, is the good of being a community or society at all. This shared good is immanent within the relationships that bring this community or society into being. Aristotle, for example, understood the *polis* as an assembly of citizens engaged in debate about how they should live together. The relationships of reciprocal interaction among citizens brought this community into being and went beyond the general welfare achieved by their economic exchanges or the public good of the architecture of the forum where they conducted their debates. Similarly, for Thomas Aquinas the common good included the bonds of affection and even love that linked people together in communities. Throughout this book we will be seeking to clarify the relevance of the varied ideas of general welfare, public interest, public goods, and the common good immanent in mutual human relationships to some of the major issues we face in public life today.

THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE ECLIPSE

Today, however, the idea of the common good is in trouble. John Rawls speaks for many observers in the West today when he says that the pluralism of the contemporary landscape makes it impossible to envision a social good on which all can agree. This is the intellectual and theoretical challenge to the common good today: diversity of visions of the good life makes it difficult or even impossible to attain a shared vision of the common good. Such a shared vision cannot survive as an intellectual goal if all ideas of the good are acknowledged to be partial, incomplete, and incompatible. This pluralism also makes it impossible to achieve a strong form of social unity in practice without repression or tyranny. This is the practical challenge: pursuit of a common good as envisioned by Aristotle, Aquinas, and Ignatius must be abandoned as a practical social objective incompatible with modern freedoms. Thus Rawls asserts that the Aristotelian, Thomistic, and Ignatian vision of the common good "is no longer a political possibility for those who accept the constraints of liberty and toleration of democratic institutions."[10]

[10] John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 201.

Such conclusions are the direct descendants of social and intellectual developments that led to the normative vision that has come to prevail in the West today. The reigning philosophy gives priority to protecting space for private, autonomous choice. It is called liberalism because of its insistence that showing equal respect for all persons means protecting the liberty of individuals to determine their own form of life when they disagree about what form of life is a good one. In Ronald Dworkin's formulation, it is based on the conviction that equal treatment of citizens demands that "political decisions must be, so far as possible, independent of any particular conception of the good life."[11] Such a stand of neutrality toward ideas of the good life is a necessary element in treating people equally because different persons in fact hold divergent understandings of what counts as good. To favor one conception of the good over another is to favor some persons over others and to treat them unequally. Thus respect for the worth of individuals requires tolerance for the different visions of the good life they hold. In this way, affirming the equality of persons is linked with being non-judgmental about what ways of life are good, at least in public and political life. In public life, all encompassing understandings of the common good must be subordinated to the importance of tolerance.[12] A live-and-let-live ethos thus leads to what John Dewey once called an "eclipse of the public."[13] The good that can be achieved in the shared domain of public life is hidden from view as protection of individual, private well-being becomes the center of normative concern.

The sources of this eclipse of the common good by the reality of pluralism run deep in the modern social and intellectual history of the West. The conviction that pursuit of the common good must be subordinate to respect for equality rests in part on judgments that have been formed by major social and political currents in this history. These judgments are historical and contingent, not

[11] Ronald Dworkin, *A Matter of Principle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 191.

[12] See Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 4, and Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 157.

[13] John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens, OH: Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 1994; orig: Henry Holt, 1927), chap. 4, "The Eclipse of the Public."

self-evident or necessary like the conclusions of mathematics and logic. So it will be useful to recall the historical basis for these judgments. This will set the stage for an inquiry into whether the conclusion that the common good remains in conflict with respect for equality remains valid under the social conditions prevailing today.

For Aristotle in ancient Greece, the common good was the goal of the whole of public life. He conceived of the human being as a social or political animal (*zoon politikon*) whose good is essentially bound up with the good of the *polis*.[14] Indeed he maintained that "a *polis* exists for the sake of a good life, and not for life only."[15] Individuals lead good lives when they make contributions to the good of the city-state. Aristotle, of course, developed his understanding of the shared good of the community in the context of the Greek *polis*, a political unit of quite limited size, and he knew that there were limits to the size of a city-state.[16] Further, the Athens of Aristotle's time was not a homogeneous and egalitarian community. It included significant numbers of resident aliens (metics) and slaves who were not entitled to participate in public life as citizens. Women too were excluded from public life. Such limits on extent and inclusiveness are prime reasons for the suspicion that the idea of the common good is irrelevant or dangerous in a large and diverse society that seeks to treat its members equally.

Nevertheless there are grounds for questioning whether this suspicion is the only lasting lesson egalitarians can draw from Greek thought today. Aristotle understood that the free males of Athens could be treated as equal citizens even when they held different understandings of the good life. The public domain of equal citizenship was the place where different understandings of the good life were to be debated and argued about. The public sphere was the forum where a working idea of the common good was to be forged. It was neither the venue where the more powerful imposed their understanding of the good life on those who were weaker, nor a domain of disengagement from those with different views. There was a third alternative to tyranny on the one hand and abandoning

[14] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1169b.
[15] Aristotle, *Politics* 1280b, 6–7, 1281a, 3–4, trans. Benjamin Jowett, in Richard McKeon, ed., *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), pp. 1188–89.
[16] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1170a.

pursuit of the common good on the other. The active engagement of free citizens in public debate about how they would live together was the mark of their equality. Our modern commitment to the equal dignity of all persons rightly challenges Aristotle's exclusion of women, slaves, and metics from the role of citizen. But it does not follow that, when citizens hold different understandings of the good life, treating them equally requires that the pursuit of the common good is potentially oppressive or illusory. Equal citizens can start from different understandings of the good but go on to participate actively in defining and pursuing the good they share in common.

In light of Aristotle's thought, the question we face today is whether Aristotle's understanding of free citizenship can be extended to all while also maintaining the pursuit of the common good as a realistic social objective. Today we are acutely aware that a nation as vast and diverse as the United States cannot hope to achieve the kind of social unity that might have been possible in the Athenian *polis*. The size and diversity of the United States, and even more of the world as a whole, make attaining common agreement on the human good today a much more formidable problem than Aristotle ever faced. Aristotle, however, also took disagreements about the best way to organize public life very seriously. In fact he began his investigation into the good of the *polis* by conducting a kind of survey of the different political systems that were in place in the known world of his time. Such an inductive approach to identifying the shape of the good society holds much promise, and the argument below will return to it.[17] But Aristotle's goal was to identify a good form of public life for a very modest-sized city-state, not for a vast and pluralistic country like the United States or for an interdependent world-wide community. The change in historical context between Aristotle's Athens and the United States today is one of the chief sources of doubts about whether we can regard the common good as a realistic goal today. Historical context and historical experience, not eternally valid facts, are the source of these doubts.

In a somewhat similar way, Thomas Aquinas thought about the common good in the relatively homogeneous context of medieval

[17] Aristotle refers both to "what has been contributed by our predecessors" and to "our collection of constitutions" as the basis of his study of the good of political communities in *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1181b.

Western Christendom. Aquinas was certainly aware of the existence of the Jewish and Arab-Muslim worlds; in fact he was influenced by some of the great thinkers of these worlds. He learned much from non-Christians such as Aristotle, from Jews like Maimonides, and from Muslims such as Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Ibn Rusd (Averroes). He had robust confidence that human reason is capable of grasping the broad outlines of the common good even in a society that is not religiously unified. Despite this notable intellectual openness, however, Aquinas wrote at a time when Christianity shaped the horizon of European civilization and culture. This horizon was the formative background for the way he thought of the common good.[18] Aquinas's awareness of non-Christian traditions did not raise questions about the possibility of a shared understanding of the good society in the deep way religious pluralism does for us today. We can no longer presume the relatively homogeneous cultural background that Aquinas most often took for granted.

Thus it is evident that the size and cultural heterogeneity of society make discussion of the common good a very different task today than it was for Aristotle or Aquinas. In such a discussion, the issue we face is whether it is reasonable to hope that adherents of different religious and cultural traditions can identify aspects of the good life that are common to the lives of all human beings. If that hope can be sustained, pursuit of the common good will remain a possibility. But if experience leads to the abandonment of that hope, tolerance of irreconcilable differences will be the most we can expect to achieve.

Eclipse of that hope is exactly what has happened due to the experience of profound religious conflict at the dawn of modernity in the West. When the Reformation shattered the religious unity of Europe, a fundamental gap was opened up between ancient and modern approaches to public life. The sixteenth-century split

[18] This is evident in the way Thomas Aquinas assumed that the religious practices of non-Christians should only be publicly tolerated within Christendom when intolerance would do greater harm than that caused by the public presence of the non-Christian rites themselves. See *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 10, art. 11. Citations of the *Summa Theologiae* are from *Summa Theologica*, 5 vols., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1948). It should be noted that Aquinas did think that such toleration was often called for. His reasoning in support of such tolerance, however, is very different from the liberal defense of tolerance. It is also very different from the Catholic position officially adopted at the Second Vatican Council.

between Catholics and Protestants, and among different kinds of Protestants as well, led to sharply conflicting conceptions of what a good society should look like. In fact these conflicts led to overt religious war and persecution. The sixteenth- and seventeenth-century wars of religion were caused in significant measure by efforts to promote ideas of the social good narrowly based on particular religious understandings.[19] These religious understandings of the common good were matters with a depth that would admit no compromise by those who held them faithfully. These sixteenth-century religious visions of the good society were the roots of "irreconcilable latent conflict."[20] When these latent conflicts came to the surface, the consequences were very bloody indeed. For example, when the Peace of Westphalia finally ended the Thirty Years War in 1648, 15 to 20 percent of the population of the Holy Roman Empire had perished from war-related causes.[21]

This memory of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century strife has marked Western historical imagination with a deep suspicion toward all proposals to base social life on convictions about the good life. Visions of the full human good, especially religious visions, have come to appear as sources of division, not unity. Political theorists often appeal to the religious wars that followed the Reformation for historical, experience-based evidence of the dangers that lurk in any attempt to base public life on ideas of the common good.[22] They fear that the outcome of pursuing strong ideas of the common good will be war between groups that hold competing ideas of the good life, oppression of those holding minority views of the good by those in the majority, or straightforward

[19] It is worth noting that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as today, conflicts with religious dimensions often have political and economic causes that are at least as important as the religious disagreements that become the rallying points for the participants. This can raise questions about whether religious tolerance will resolve such conflicts or whether other solutions to the economic and social causes must be found. If the latter is the case, such conflicts need to be viewed in a larger context than the liberal commitment to tolerance can provide on its own.

[20] See Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, pp. xxv–xxvi.

[21] Geoffrey Parker, *The Thirty Years' War* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 211.

[22] For example, John Rawls states that "the historical origin of political liberalism, and liberalism more generally, is the Reformation and its aftermath, with the long controversies over religious toleration in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries." *Political Liberalism*, p. xxiv.

tyranny. In Rawls's words, "A public and workable agreement on a single and general comprehensive conception [of the good] could be maintained only by the oppressive use of state power."[23] Thus a public regime based on a positive moral commitment to tolerance came to be seen as the only reasonable alternative to continued religious war. The memory of post-Reformation religious conflicts remains deep in the Western psyche today and it is reinforced by contemporary conflicts that have explicitly religious dimensions. Because of these historical experiences, the notion of the common good seems very dangerous to many political theorists in the West.

This suspicion is not limited to ideas of the common good that are based on Christian religious convictions. It extends to understandings of the common good found in the Western political tradition known as civic republicanism. This republican tradition is represented by thinkers as religiously different from Thomas Aquinas as were Cicero, Machiavelli, and Rousseau. These thinkers envisioned personal well-being and the well-being of the republic as inseparable. Being a good person required fulfilling one's responsibilities as a citizen for the public good. Indeed personal virtue and good citizenship were often identified in republican thought. This was an appropriation of Aristotle's understanding of the bonds between fellow citizens as the most honorable forms of friendship.[24] And very recently Hannah Arendt sought to retrieve this high estimate of citizenship by identifying genuinely human action with

[23] Rawls, "The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus," *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 7 (1987), 1–25, at 4. See Rawls's more recent formulation of this idea in his *Political Liberalism*, pp. 36–38. Rawls acknowledges that basing the institutions of society upon a "conception of justice that can be understood as in some way advancing the common good" (usually the common good understood in religious terms) need not lead to religious war and persecution. As he understands the idea of the common good, however, such a society will not treat all its members as free and equal citizens but, at best, as entitled to have their good taken into account and to be consulted in the formation of policies. He sees such a society as based on a "reasonable consultation hierarchy" and distinguishes it from a democratic society as understood in liberal terms. This, however, is not the only way to conceive of the role of the common good in a free society, as I will try to indicate below. See Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 109, and Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 62–78.

[24] Aristotle writes that "friendship seems to hold states together" and that "concord is friendship among fellow citizens" in *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1155a and 1167b. "State" is Ostwald's translation of *polis*. Aristotle himself, of course, raised the question of how large a *polis* could be before this kind of unity becomes impossible. See *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1170b–1171a.

the kind of communication and argument about public affairs that takes place among fellow citizens.[25]

This civic republican tradition, however, carries dangers that bring it under the same kind of suspicion as is directed at religious conceptions of the common good today. For Rawls, any comprehensive conception of the good life, whether religious, philosophical, or moral, carries the same dangers as became evident in the wars of religion. So we must abandon the notion that political life can achieve the kind of strong community for which the republican tradition hopes.[26] Pursuit of such communal bonds in political life carries a high danger of conflict. It may also require repression or oppression. This is the "dark underside" of republicanism pointed out by Jean Bethke Elshtain, despite her sympathies for the nobility of its understanding of citizenship. The civic virtue that has often moved people and nations to great actions together has had one glaring problem historically: it has frequently been "armed."[27] From republican Sparta, to Plato's ideal republic at Athens, to Machiavelli's exhortations to Lorenzo de'Medici on the usefulness of fear in governing Florence, to Rousseau's elevation of the general will over that of the individual, there has been a notable tendency to identify the common good with political control and military victory. Civic *virtù* becomes a close relative of military valor. So the same fear that rises from the memory of religious wars is brought to the surface by talk of republican virtue. The same apprehension arises about the high place it grants to the idea of the common good. These fears lead to suspicion that any notion of the common good,

[25] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition: A Study of the Central Dilemmas Facing Modern Man* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1959), esp. pp. 155–185. Arendt writes that the *polis* as the sphere of human action "properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be" (177). Thus the question of whether the Greek idea of the *polis* is viable today is a question of the possibility of genuine communication and argument about the public affairs of a nation or a world as large, diverse, and complex as ours.

[26] See Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 146.

[27] Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Citizenship and Armed Civic Virtue: Some Critical Questions on the Commitment to Public Life," in Charles H. Reynolds and Ralph V. Norman, eds., *Community in America: The Challenge of Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 47–55, at 50. Elshtain develops these ideas in an extended feminist meditation on the idea of civic virtue and war in her *Women and War* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

whether based on religious or secular-philosophical grounds, will lead to trampling upon the freedom and dignity of those who do not share it. Within this historically formed imaginative framework, respect for equal dignity appears possible only by standing on guard against the imposition of values we do not already hold. A certain wariness sets the agenda for how we deal with diversity and pluralism. This wariness is a deep bias imprinted on the contemporary social imagination by some of the major currents in the modern social and political history of Europe. The question this leaves open, however, is whether this imaginative predisposition fits the contours of the history that is unfolding today. We will argue below that it does not.

PLURALISM AND THE COMMON GOOD TODAY

The relevance of these historical considerations is not confined to the role they have played in calling the idea of the common good into question in academic philosophy and political theory. Skepticism about the compatibility of a shared vision of the good life with respect for freedom is widespread in contemporary popular consciousness in the West today, especially in the United States. People today are increasingly aware that they have many different kinds of neighbors, both nearby and far away. And these neighbors have many ideas about what a good life is. The reality of pluralism impinges on people daily as they rub shoulders at their workplace with those who have different religious beliefs and cultural traditions, and whose race or ethnicity is different from their own. They hear languages other than English as they commute to work and do the shopping. This diversity can, of course, be seen as a source of variety that enriches human life both for individuals and in society. But the experience of diversity is also accompanied by regular reports in the media of ethnic and religious conflict.[28] Television also

[28] Diana Eck writes that "pluralism is not just another word for diversity. It goes beyond mere plurality or diversity to active engagement with that plurality . . . to the active attempt to understand the other." It will become clear in my discussion of intellectual solidarity in chapter 6 that I fully endorse this goal. Eck also writes, however, this engagement and effort to understand "is not a given but must be created." Whether this is possible is the issue being raised here. See Diana Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), p. 70.

brings images of urban gang conflict, drive-by shootings, and drug-use into middle-class homes. Under the influence of such reports and images, diversity can seem more a threat than an enrichment. If people who are different from oneself seem at least potentially dangerous, it becomes difficult to see them as neighbors. It becomes hard to imagine that a life that is shared with them in significant ways could also be a good life.

Some years ago the political theorist Michael Sandel stated that "we can know a good in common that we cannot know alone."[29] Sandel was suggesting that a shared social life makes knowledge of the common good possible. His argument also implies that a shared life together makes practical pursuit of this common good a social necessity. This book will argue that Sandel's statement is true. But it is difficult to make a realistic case for this position when society is as aware of its diversity as we have become today. This awareness of diversity is deeply tinged by historical memories of religious wars and by images of ethnic and religious conflict from the contemporary scene. Sandel's statement depends upon a sizeable number of people being able to appreciate and value existing bonds of social connection with each other. This positive experience of social interdependence enables persons to learn from one another, thus giving rise to understandings of the good life that could not be envisioned apart from their connections. But if large numbers of those with whom one rubs shoulders are seen as strangers, positive experiences of social unity are unlikely to arise. It is even less likely when divergences of culture, tradition, and ways of life make them look like threats to each other. When fear of these threats sets the tone, interaction with people who are different is perceived as a danger to be avoided. Serious interaction and mutual vulnerability can seem more like a "common bad" than a good to be shared in common. Defense of one's turf becomes the first requirement of the good life. The common good becomes a will-o'-the-wisp in such an environment. So a positive experience of life together, common knowledge of what a good life is, and the philosophical idea of the common good itself all seem to evanesce together.

[29] Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 183.

This is a relatively new situation for the West in general and for the United States in particular. Pluralism and group conflict, of course, have been around for a long time. The novelty today is that consciousness of pluralism has become routine. Cultural and religious differences are taken for granted as a part of the way things are and will remain in the future. In post-Reformation Europe, knowledge of religious differences between Protestants and Catholics was real, but such disagreements were not simply accepted as here to stay. Believers hoped for conversion or victory over their religious adversaries at an unspecified future date. Similarly, in the days of the Cold War before the tumultuous events of 1989, Westerners could map the globe into the free world, the Communist world, and those regions over which the other two blocs contended for influence. Within this framework one could envision the common good as the expansion of Western values throughout the world. Such a shared vision of the good society of the future followed from the principle that freedom is better than tyranny. Alternatively, Marxists in the Eastern bloc could project the common good as the international victory of socialism. The end of the Cold War has destroyed these simplifications and made the picture much more complex.

Several years ago Francis Fukuyama predicted that the end of the ideological conflict of the Cold War would lead to the "end of history," with Western liberal democracy spreading across the globe and making future politics peaceful but boring.[30] This now seems naive to say the least. The rise of ethnic and religious conflict on the international stage has uncovered latent differences among peoples that seem to go at least as deep as the formerly contending Western and Marxist ideologies. For example, awareness of the presence of Islam as a major political force in the world has grown rapidly in the West, thanks to the visibility of the Ayatollah Khomeini, Muamar Khadaffy, Saddam Hussein, and most especially in light of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York that led the United States and its allies into full-scale war in Afghanistan. In the face of this Islamic resurgence, the France

[30] Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History," *The National Interest* 16 (Summer, 1989) 4, 18. Fukuyama has developed this article at book length in *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

that gave the West the revolutionary principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity has been unsure whether Muslim girls should be permitted to wear religiously prescribed head-coverings in French schools. Agonizing conflicts in Northern Ireland, the former Yugoslavia, and Central Africa have also raised new questions about the possibility of harmony among people with different traditions about the meaning of the good life.

One does not have to look very hard to find similar divisions among communities within the United States. The country faces divisive questions about the meaning of religious freedom today. Do First Amendment protections of religious freedom extend to permitting Native Americans to use peyote in their religious rites, to Caribbean immigrants practicing Santaria rituals involving animal sacrifice, and to those citizens who want to send their children to religiously affiliated schools with the financial support that vouchers would provide? Court rulings on such cases have stimulated efforts to pass a "Religious Freedom Restoration Act," implying that the first American freedom has been undermined and needs to be restored. The emergence of new religious movements, "cults" and even militias in the United States show that at least some Americans believe that the traditional religious and social institutions of the country cannot be relied on to help them live good lives. On the basis of memories of slavery, lynchings, ethnic exclusion, and newly awakened awareness of historical patterns of abuse and discrimination, advocacy groups argue forcefully against trusting the traditional ways of doing things. These traditional ways and institutions do not protect their well-being or give them a fair chance to live good lives. Others see these advocates as threats to the republic and respond in kind. Thus debates about remedies for the effects of racial discrimination, for example, have been deeply divided on whether equal protection of fundamental rights should be color-blind and opposed to affirmative action, or color-conscious and supportive of affirmative action.[31] In Martin Marty's words

During the final quarter of the twentieth century many groups of citizens have come to accuse others of having wounded them by attempting to

[31] See for example, K. Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutmann, *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), and Stephen Thernstrom and Abigail Thernstrom, *America in Black and White: One Nation, Indivisible* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997).

impose a single national identity and culture on all. [An] other set, in turn, has accused its newly militant adversaries of tearing the republic apart. They do this, it is said, by insisting on their separate identities and by promoting their own mutually exclusive subcultures at the expense of the common weal. Taken together, these contrasting motions produce a shock to the civil body, a trauma in the cultural system, and a paralysis in the neural web of social interactions.[32]

In this way, the injustices of the past haunt the present in the United States today and threaten new conflicts.

Awareness of diversity is thus a prominent fact in daily experience today. When difference generates conflict, fear grows. And such fear makes further conflict more likely. This raises the spectre that we have fallen into a downward spiral in which awareness of differences leads to conflict, which in turn leads to fear, more conflict, more defensive boundaries, and onward to deepened perceptions of difference. At least this much can be said: in the face of these tensions we cannot simply presume that there is a good shared in common by people who are more or less the same, nor is it obvious that this shared good can be readily identified. Indeed quite a few social commentators think the hope that we can identify and pursue the common good is utopian today. Perhaps it is a nostalgic hangover from time past, when people lived side-by-side in close-knit neighborhoods and in countries where those who were significantly different could be kept at a safe distance. We may be inclined to say: "Once upon a time there was a common life where what was good for one was good for all. In those days we could hold town meetings and elect representatives to decide how to achieve the shared good that benefits all of us. But today, the best we can hope for is tolerance toward all that makes us different from one another, and at worst we have to be ready to fight." Thus when people disagree about the good life and take it for granted that this disagreement is here to stay, the hope that they can "know a good in common that they cannot know alone" seems a rather thin one.

[32] Martin E. Marty, *The One and the Many: America's Struggle for the Common Good* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 3. Marty uses the term "trauma" to characterize this set of conflicts over the past several decades throughout this book. See the book's index under "trauma."

Pluralism, by definition, means disagreement about what is finally true and good. A pluralist society is one where people do not share an understanding of the full breadth and depth of the good life. Thus almost by definition pluralism seems to make conceiving of a common good an impossible task. More strongly, it suggests that we should abandon efforts to encourage people to live in a way that realizes a common vision lest these efforts perpetuate past injustices, deepen conflicts, or even precipitate war. Where there is no shared vision of the good life does it make sense to speak of a community at all? When people who hold different understandings of what makes for a good life regard each other warily and with suspicion, it would be more accurate to speak of a tense juxtaposition of human beings than of a community. Perhaps that is the best we can hope for. Perhaps the pursuit of a vision of the good life to be lived in common by all is a dangerous prelude to oppression and even tyranny.

PUBLIC OPINION: THOU SHALT NOT JUDGE

Some recent social-scientific investigations have concluded that failure to recognize this situation is precipitating a deep cultural rift in the United States today. This *Kulturkampf* is putatively not restricted to disagreements on single issues such as abortion or affirmative action, though such disagreements certainly exist. Rather, authors such as James Davison Hunter, Christopher Lasch, and Gertrude Himmelfarb have suggested that a fundamental conflict of world-views has developed that is splitting American citizens into opposed camps. In Hunter's analysis these splits are pitting orthodox or traditional wings of the middle class against those who regard themselves as progressive. In Lasch's reading, it sets the middle-class working people against upper middle-class managerial elites.[33] In both cases the battle lines of this supposed culture war are located *within* the middle class itself. In Himmelfarb's view, the division cuts through class lines and through lines of religion, race, ethnicity, and gender as well. It is an "ethics gap," with "moral

[33] See James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), and Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995).

disarray on the one hand and religious-cum-moral revival on the other."[34]

If this picture of culture war is true, the consequences for the United States as a whole could be ominous. Aristotle and many after him have long argued that societies with a large middle class are less subject to internal conflict than those polarized between rich and poor. Middle economic status supposedly makes people politically moderate, strengthening the stability of society. In Aristotle's words, "it is manifest that the best political community is formed by citizens of the middle class, and that those states are likely to be well administered in which the middle class is large . . . Where the middle class is large, there are least likely to be factions and dissensions."[35] Following this line of reasoning, a polarization of the middle class would threaten social and political stability. Weakening of middle-class consensus about what constitutes the good life would act as a solvent on the glue that holds the whole society together. Thus Alan Wolfe states that "if even a part of this story about middle-class decline and fracturing is true, the implications could not be greater. The issue is simple to state: an angry, inward-looking, and hopelessly divided middle class is not a middle class at all." Thus the hypothesis that there is a culture war underway in the United States raises "the prospect that the democratic stability that has kept the country together since the Civil War will no longer be attainable."[36] One might add that middle-class instability and internal conflict in the United States would also have very great implications for the world as a whole.

For this reason the contention that the United States is not only pluralistic but culturally at war with itself over a broad range of moral values calls for careful scrutiny. Wolfe believes that the facts do not support the culture-war hypothesis and he is relieved to be able to say so. Nevertheless, the data that lead Wolfe to this conclusion are not reassuring from the point of view of concern for the common good. A number of empirical studies, including

[34] Gertrude Himmelfarb, *One Nation, Two Cultures* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), chap. 6, esp. pp. 116–117.

[35] Aristotle, *Politics* 1295b, 35–38, 1296a, 8–9.

[36] Alan Wolfe, *One Nation After All: What Middle-Class Americans Really Think: About God, Country, Family, Racism, Welfare, Immigration, Homosexuality, Work, the Right, the Left, and Each Other* (New York: Viking, 1998), pp.14–15.

Wolfe's own, suggest that conflict is being avoided precisely by abandoning the pursuit of the common good. This abandonment appears to many to be a key to a more humane society. Tolerance for difference rather than pursuit of a common good seems the safest path. It seems the path least likely to perpetuate past harms or provoke new violence, and the route most compatible with the freedom so highly valued in modern Western cultures. Or so, it seems, many Americans have concluded.

There are many indications in the United States today that tolerance of diversity occupies the place held by the common good in the thought of Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and Ignatius Loyola. Tolerance of difference, not the common good, has become the highest social aspiration in American culture. And the range of matters to which tolerance is extended has been broadening. Historically the need for tolerance has been associated in the West with the fact of religious disagreement. Religious freedom became the "first freedom" in the minds of Americans and religious coercion the "first oppression." Today, however, the fear of conflict focuses not only on religious disagreement as a source of social strife but on many other types of disagreement about the good life as well. The wars of religion led many in the past to argue that religion must become a private matter if social peace is to be possible. Today it is argued that *all* fully articulated visions of the good life should similarly be viewed as private or "non-public." Again John Rawls is representative of this trend in political theory. He maintains that today there is a need to extend tolerance beyond the religious sphere to all comprehensive "conceptions of what is of value in human life, and ideals of personal character, as well as ideals of friendship and of familial and associational relationships, and much else that is to inform our conduct, and in the limit to our life as a whole." Thus Rawls asserts that avoiding conflicts like the religious wars of the past means we should today "simply apply the principle of toleration to philosophy itself," that is, to all fully developed understandings or visions of the good life.[37]

This appeal for a broadening of the scope of tolerance is not an esoteric invention of political theory. It is clearly a strong force

[37] Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, pp. 10, 13.

Table 1.1. *"Morality is a personal matter and society should not force everyone to follow one standard"*

Agree strongly	469
Agree somewhat	575
Disagree somewhat	259
Disagree strongly	113
Don't know	57
No answer	8

Source: General Social Survey, question 374 D Codebook variable: PERMORAL[38]

in the climate of American public opinion today. For example, the *General Social Survey* of American beliefs and attitudes reveals the high place given to tolerance by the American public. Table 1.1 indicates that most Americans think of morality, not just religion, as a personal matter rather than as a set of standards that should be enforced in society at large. 67 percent of Americans agreed, either "strongly" or "somewhat," that morality is "personal." One could interpret this as meaning that judgments about right and wrong are simply private matters having little or nothing to do with the well-being of the larger society. Such an interpretation would imply that many Americans think morality is not concerned with the common good of the larger community. If this is correct, the common good is a dead issue in the minds of most Americans. Before reaching this conclusion, however, we should note that this question in the *General Social Survey* is two-pronged, for its second clause raises the issue of whether morality should be enforced by unspecified coercive means. Agreement with the statement could be explained by the respondents' aversion to political coercion and the dangers of excessive state power, not by their conviction that morality does not extend to the public good.

Another question in the *General Social Survey* suggests that viewing morality as personal is related to many Americans' belief that morality, both public and private, is a domain of ambiguity.

[38] Data from the *General Social Survey* have been downloaded from the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research world-wide web homepage: http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/gss/.

Table 1.2. *"Right and wrong are not usually a simple matter of black and white; there are many shades of gray"*

Agree strongly	589
Agree somewhat	624
Disagree somewhat	115
Disagree strongly	102
Don't know	43

Source: General Social Survey, question 374 B Codebook variable: BLKWHITE

Table 1.2 indicates that over 82 percent agreed either "strongly" or "somewhat" that the answers to moral questions are "gray" rather than "black and white." This grayness is a likely source of the desire to keep moral decisions within the zone of personal discretion. Few people want to surrender close-call moral decisions to anyone who might use coercive power to settle such matters for them. Suspicion of state coercion, of course, is compatible with the belief that we have moral obligations to promote the common good and that there is such a thing as a public morality. This reading of the responses would imply that the common good should be pursued by citizens through their voluntary, uncoerced activity. Such voluntary activity for the common good could even be regarded as morally required. Those who see morality in shades of gray may simply be saying they do not want bureaucrats or police making such judgments for them.

Other attitudes uncovered by the *General Social Survey*, however, imply that the conviction that morality is "personal" has a deeper root than fear of coercion.[39] A third question suggests that when Americans say morality is "personal" they in fact mean it is "private." Table 1.3 shows that 57 percent either strongly agree or agree that "we make our own fate." These responses highlight the individualistic view of human existence that has long been evident

[39] Alan Wolfe, in his most recent book, *Moral Freedom: The Search for Virtue in a World of Choice* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), seems at times to suggest that Americans view "moral freedom" as not being coerced or directed by some authority. At other times he seems to imply that "moral freedom" means there are no preexisting moral standards whether coercively enforced or not. It is not entirely clear to me which meaning of moral freedom Wolfe finds present in American culture, though on p. 224 he states it is the former rather than the latter.

Table 1.3. *"We each make our own fate"*

Strongly agree	200
Agree	510
Neither agree nor disagree	237
Disagree	149
Strongly disagree	79
Can't choose	44
No answer	65

Source: General Social Survey, question 673 G Codebook variable: OWNFATE; responses from the year 1998

in American culture. A clear majority of Americans believe they are in charge of their own destinies. The widespread presence of such belief is further confirmed by "The Way We Live Now Poll" conducted for the *New York Times Magazine.* In this poll, 85 percent of a random sample of Americans agreed with the statement "I believe it is possible in America to pretty much be who you want to be," while only 14 percent disagreed. This positive response varied very little by income, with 82 percent of those earning less than $30,000 per year and 90 percent of those earning more than $75,000 agreeing with the statement. [40] Such beliefs imply that living a good life is not dependent on the conditions of public life, whether these are economic, political, or cultural. If a good life is "self-made" there is little reason to be concerned about the quality of public life; morality becomes a matter of the private rather than the public good.

Taken at face value, the statement that we make our own fate implies that we are not ultimately vulnerable to contingencies of social and natural circumstances. Circumstances of birth, family relationships, economic conditions, sexual, racial or ethnic identity, environmental conditions, international war and peace, and a host of other factors can be ignored as unimportant to what one's life ultimately amounts to. Whatever others may do, people still have the freedom to shape their lives in accord with the values they

[40] Results of "The Way We Live Now Poll" were published in *The New York Times Magazine* (May 7, 2000). The data for the question cited here can be found on p. 66 of this issue of the Magazine.

hold. This suggests that social and natural conditions are not very important in living a good life. It is not a big leap from this presupposition to the conclusion that the idea of the common good is irrelevant to living well. The good life, and morality with it, is seen as a private matter both in its source and its scope.

This privatized view of the good life depends on a very selective reading of the forces actually at work in shaping lives. It is so selective that it cannot be taken literally. Rather, agreement with the statements that "we make our own fate" and "you can pretty much be who you want to be" must be more an indication of what people think is most important than of their realistic description of how human lives actually unfold. It suggests that those aspects of life under the power of personal freedom are more important to most Americans than those determined by social contexts or historical contingencies. Thus affirming that fate is self-made is as much an indication of an individualistic value system as is it a description of fact. It puts the quality of public life low on the scale of goods and directs attention away from goods that can only be realized in the shared life of the larger society. Thus it devalues the common good and directs attention away from the common conditions of public life.[41]

It would be risky, of course, to base large generalizations about American culture on a few survey questions such as these. Indeed the interpretation just suggested is at best hypothetical. There is further evidence, however, of the fragility of the common good in American culture today. Ironically it is most evident in the work of a social scientist who has strongly rejected the culture-war hypothesis. Alan Wolfe's study, *One Nation After All*, is based on empirical research that goes deeper than the inevitably hypothetical interpretations of correlations among responses uncovered by survey research. Wolfe interviewed approximately two hundred middle-class Americans in depth, pursuing open-ended, oral questioning on key issues of public morality. His goal was to discover, with more subtlety than is possible with survey instruments alone, what a

[41] For an interpretation of these questions of the *General Social Survey* that support the argument presented here, see Daniel Rigney and Michael Kearl, "A Nation of Gray Individualists: Moral Relativism in the United States," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 25, no. 1 (Spring, 1994), 20–45.

representative group of middle-class Americans really think on matters of public morality.[42]

Wolfe rejects the culture-war scenario and argues that the beliefs and values of the American middle class are still largely homogeneous. In fact he finds something close to consensus on what is valued most highly by the middle class in the United States today. This consensus on the *summum bonum* can be summed up in a single word: *tolerance*. The high value placed on tolerance is evident in the attitudes toward religious belief Wolfe found in the middle class. But tolerance is central not just in attitudes toward religion; it is also evident in middle-class attitudes on a large number of other questions with important consequences for the quality of public life. These include the structure of family life, gender roles, immigration, multiculturalism, and race. By actually talking to people in some depth and asking them what they really mean when they express their opinions, Wolfe concludes that America is not coming apart at the seams in a culture war. If there is a culture war going on in the United States it is largely being fought by intellectuals rather than ordinary middle-class people. Wolfe's hopeful conclusion is that the tolerance of the American middle class is not reflected in high-visibility wars of words conducted in the academy and the mass media. In fact, the American middle class today is a restraining force on academic and political elites, as Aristotle would have predicted. Average Americans are too non-judgmental to get sucked into battles that might tear the country apart. From this Wolfe takes a certain modest comfort.[43]

For example, his interviews indicate that the United States is not about to enter a period of war between traditionalist religious believers and progressive secularists. Neither a war with guns nor a war of words based on religious disagreement seems imminent

[42] Those interviewed by Wolfe were selected for their geographical, racial, cultural, ethnic, and job-related representativeness of the suburban middle class. Within this representative framework, Wolfe tilted the sample somewhat toward the conservative end of the cultural spectrum, to assure that the "progressive," "new-class," and managerial "elites" held by other theorists to be the originators of the culture war did not dominate the interviews. Wolfe's research method and sample make his conclusions more ominous for the viability of the idea of the common good than if they could be seen as biased toward the "liberal" end of the culture. See Wolfe, *One Nation After All*, pp. 19–35 for a description of the sample on which Wolfe's study is based.

[43] *Ibid.*, p. 309.

among the people. It is true that Americans are more likely to be religious believers than are citizens of any of the other advanced industrial nations of the North Atlantic. But the American religious style is a "quiet faith" that is strongly averse to religious conflict. Indeed Wolfe suggests that most middle-class Americans have added an eleventh commandment to the biblical decalogue: "Thou shalt not judge."[44] In light of the terrible bloodshed of past and present religious wars, this is encouraging. The faith of middle-class Americans has been tempered by their almost absolute aversion to strife and conflict about religious beliefs. In Wolfe's words, "Religious tolerance in America bears a distinct resemblance to laissez-faire economics: you can do what you want so long as you let me do what I want."[45]

Wolfe also finds that this tolerance is not restricted to matters of religion. It extends to matters of race, ethnicity, family structure, and many other matters of public morality, with the notable exception of homosexuality. He calls this tolerant stance on a broad spectrum of issues "capacious individualism." The ethic that informs it he calls "morality writ small." This is an ethic that aspires to "modest virtues" and "ordinary duties," such as kindness and honesty rather than larger goals of social justice and social equality. These modest virtues are surely important; their lively presence among ordinary Americans is surely preferable to the anger and resentment that the practitioners of group conflict promote. A culture war in the United States would be a very bad thing. The American Civil War has already shown this vividly, and the recent abominations in the former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda have confirmed it afresh. So Wolfe breathes a sigh of relief to find tolerance alive and well in the United States.

It remains an open question, however, whether generous and tolerant individualism is up to dealing with the problems we face today. Despite Wolfe's relief that cultural war does not seem imminent in the United States, he has nagging doubts about whether non-judgmentalism can provide what we need as we face the future. Shortly after the appearance of *One Nation After All*, Wolfe confessed that his research left him "somewhat depressed." The

[44] *Ibid.*, p. 54. [45] *Ibid.*, p. 63.

principal reason for this is that morality writ small lacks "a shared sense of national purpose." The ethic of tolerance shows the right instincts, but it "lacks a vision of how to put them to constructive use." Americans may value personal responsibility highly, but they also have a distinct lack of enthusiasm for meeting the responsibilities of national citizenship. "They seemed to want the benefits of being American without the obligations of paying taxes or paying attention." They are also distinctly unenthusiastic about the international responsibilities that go along with being an American in the emerging global context. Wolfe conjectures that this narrowness of vision is a by-product of the prosperity of the middle class. In the comfortable world of the middle class, morality writ small translates into "couch-potato politics," an unwillingness or inability to articulate common purposes and act to secure them.[46]

In other words, middle-class Americans lack a vision of the common good, both in their approach to national life and in their understanding of the role of the United States internationally. This lack raises fundamental questions. Will a culture in which tolerance is the prime virtue generate a society good enough to sustain its citizens' loyalty over the long haul? Does avoiding judgments lead to an attenuated vision of what is possible by telling us never to say anything in public that others do not already agree with? If tolerance becomes a card that trumps all strong proposals on how we should live together, will it stifle the imagination needed to address pressing public problems? The next chapter will suggest that creative response to some of the pressing social problems emerging today will require a considerably stronger commitment to the common good than we now have.

[46] Alan Wolfe, "Couch Potato Politics," *New York Times* (Sunday, March 15, 1998), sec. 4, p. 17.