Before and After 9/11
Religion, Politics, and Ethics

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To cite this article: Tom Rockmore (2006) Before and After 9/11, Ars Disputandi, 6:1, 115-127, DOI: 10.1080/15665399.2006.10819913

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/15665399.2006.10819913

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Published online: 06 May 2014.

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Abstract
My topic concerns the interrelation between religion, politics and ethics in a time of terror, or at least a historical moment when the general problem of terrorism has come to occupy center stage. The frequent view that 9/11 represents a wholly new situation, a break with the past makes it difficult, perhaps impossible to understand it. I believe that it is because 9/11 does not break with but continues tendencies already underway that it occurred and we can understand it. My paper, which insists on continuity as opposed to rupture, consists of six parts. The first part evokes two well known approaches to 9/11: the clash of cultures, or civilizations, due to Samuel Huntington, and religious incompatibility defended, i.A. by Bernard Lewis. In the second and third parts argue that both approaches incorrectly presuppose the autonomy of culture and religion. In the fourth part I contend that in the modern world religion and politics are subordinated to economic factors. In the fifth and last part I suggest how ethics can be recovered from a constructivist perspective.

1 Two explanations of 9/11

According to the dictionary, terrorism consists in the use of violence and intimidation in the pursuit of political aims. Many, especially the Bush administration, take terrorism to be new, the salient fact of our times justifying emergency measures, even something like a permanent state of emergency. Understood in the narrow sense in which terrorism is restricted to physical violence, it goes all the way back to ancient times, including the well known instance of the Athenian intimidation of the Melians during the Peloponnesian Wars. What is perhaps new is the uncertainty that has been raised about the ability to defend the world’s only remaining superpower, which incorrectly believed it was able to dictate to the rest of the world. A largely successful attack on some of its most visible symbols has shown that as concerns its ability to resist terrorism, the US is not strong but rather weak. In Hegelian terms, it turns out that US is not the master but rather the slave of the slaves, simply unable to protect itself even with the most stringent measures against the permanent possibility of terrorism.

It is unclear that much can be done to ameliorate the present situation, that is, to win the war on terrorism. The efforts of the US to defend itself include so far at a minimum wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, detention of uncharged captives at Guantanamo Bay, abuse of prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison and elsewhere, arrest and indefinite detention of US citizens, the Patriots Act which restricts freedom in the name of freedom, the new national security doctrine authorizing preemptive

war as opposed to preventive war on the supposition that at some future time it is possible that a particular country might pose a threat to the US, and so on. Yet I doubt whether anyone who has recently been at an airport in the United States has been impressed with the practical utility of the very costly show of security as an effective deterrent to any but the most amateur potential terrorist.

In order to know how to react to 9/11, we need to understand it. That is more difficult than it seems. The simplest view, which is apparently widely held is that an unprovoked attack was launched by evil people on a bastion of democracy, and that the appropriate way to respond is to extend democracy since, as Bernard Lewis, the historian of the Middle East, puts it, ‘The war against terror and the quest for freedom are inextricably linked, and neither can succeed without the other.’

This dualistic analysis, which distantly echoes Christian Manicheanism, supposes that the distinction between good and evil, as well freedom and unfreedom, is clear. The West is basically good and certain elements concentrated in the Middle East, but found elsewhere as well, are waging a terrorist campaign against freedom. Yet an analysis of historical phenomena in such terms is too simplistic. Other than the claims of the different sides, there is no reason to associate good with one or evil with the other, and it is unclear how to analyze the causes of 9/11 in either moral (or ethical) terms.

In approaching the series of events known as 9/11, we need to distinguish between the facts, such as the fact that almost three thousand people died in the attack on the World Trade Center, and their general causes (and consequences). As part of the revolt against British idealism when Anglo-American analytic philosophy was emerging, Russell and Moore insisted on empiricism as the epistemological remedy on the incorrect assumption that, as Moore affirmed, idealism denies the existence of the external world. This anti-idealist movement peaked in logical atomism, or the effort in both Russell and the early Wittgenstein to link up facts with concepts. This effort failed since, as Wittgenstein later in effect argues, claims for knowledge are indexed to a context, suggesting that facts are facts for a conceptual framework. Now I believe there is no difference between the general problem of knowledge and the problem of historical knowledge. The causes of 9/11 are difficult, perhaps impossible to perceive if we take it as a representing a break, or rupture with history. If that is true, then the facts about 9/11, which simply cannot be understood in isolation, must be understood against the historical background.

According to Wittgenstein’s later view, the world needs to be grasped against the background of an underlying conceptual. If so-called facts cannot be grasped directly, but only on the basis of a wider theory, then 9/11 cannot adequately be grasped as an event or series of events isolated from other events. We need to understand it in the developing context, as belonging to a series of events both preceding and succeeding them. The widespread view that it is

fundamentally and irrevocably new, without precedent, which makes them sui
generis, a time out of time so to speak, is false, since terrorism is not new or novel.
It further prevents us from understanding 9/11 in other than a superficial way.

[7] The claim that facts need to be related to conceptual frameworks does
not tell us anything about the frameworks in question. Hegel suggests that
conceptual frameworks are always potentially subject to revision in virtue of
their ability to explain experience. The two explanatory frameworks still most
popular with the public are the idea that 9/11 is due to a clash of cultures or
civilizations, which is associated with Samuel Huntington, and the view that we
are witnessing a clash between two disparate religions. Each of these views has
something to recommend it; each is part of the puzzle; but neither is satisfactory
as an overall explanatory hypothesis without appealing to other, arguably more
important factors.

2 Huntington’s cultural thesis

[8] Multiculturalism sometimes features so-called identity politics, which is
usually taken to refer to social activism, theories and similar activities based on the
shared background of a specific group. Huntington applies a version of identity
theory to world politics in what can be called a postmodern theory of international
relations. Unlike multiculturalists, his aim is not to insist on respect for all forms
of culture, but rather to understand future clashes. His thesis was originally stated
in an article[9] and then developed in a book[10]. According to Huntington, who was
writing in the early 1990s, the main source of future conflict will not be ideological
or economic but rather a cultural clash between ‘groups of different civilizations.’

[9] Huntington’s hypothesis is explicitly tied to surpassing the concept of the
nation state in the form of a civilization, or culture, terms which he identifies and
does not distinguish in grouping countries together in terms of their culture and
civilization – e.g. the West, the Arab or the Chinese communities – as opposed
to political or economic systems or economic development. He believes that,
say, all Italians of whatever kind share something in common which creates
an identity, and that they further belong within the West, but that West does
not belong to a further grouping. According to Huntington, the processes of
economic modernization and social change throughout the world are separating
people from longstanding local identities, hence weakening the nation state as
a source of identity. He further holds that as ideological divisions disappear or
weaken cultural differences become more important. As examples, he points
to the contest over some 1300 years between Islam and the West, and to the
interlocking directorate composed of the United States, Britain and France which
together with Japan dominates the decisions made at the UN Security Council or
in other important bodies.

4. See Samuel P. Huntington, The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order, New
The considerable interest of his approach lies in acknowledging that for historical reasons the identity of the main historical actors changes over time. This is an important point which is often neglected, particularly in modern philosophy which persists in depicting the subject on a quasi-Cartesian model as situated beyond social context, time and history.

I do not want to challenge Huntington’s overall analysis of international relations, but only its utility as an explanation of 9/11. Certain details in Huntington’s account are either questionable or now require revision. Writing a dozen years ago before the effective emergence of China on the economic world stage, Huntington thought that Japan presented the only non-Western threat to Western economic dominance. He holds, though this is not confirmed by such phenomena as emigration or religious conversion, that though other traits can be altered, membership in one or another civilization cannot.

He assumes cultural homogeneity which is not often if ever attained in large contemporary nations, such as China, India and the US, and, as a result of greater mobility, increasingly less often even in the smaller ones such as Holland. Even in China, where the Han people represent more than 90% of the population, the plurality of languages and distinct cultures in that immense country makes it questionable to regard it as a single homogeneous entity.

Huntington weakens the roles of ideology and economics in arguing for culture as the main explanatory factor. conceptions of ideology and economics. Ever since Daniel Bell declared the end of ideology, it has been popular to decry it. Yet, depending on what it means, ideology is arguably as widespread and important now as it has ever been. In the Bush administration no or practically no questions are decided on their merits, since all or practically all decisions are decided in terms of ideological commitments to various special interest groups.

Ideology operates as a proximal cause though it is finally an effect. Hitler obviously hated Jews, but it would be farfetched to regard his deep anti-Semitism as a basic cause of the Second World War. At most Hitler’s desire to kill Jews was a secondary theme, enlisted as a means to realizing his vision of Germany, but not the end in view. The fact that his virulent dislike of Jews was not the central point enabled so many intellectuals, like Heidegger and Schmitt, who did not necessarily share his anti-Semitism, to become enthusiastic Nazis.

‘Ideology,’ which is understood in so many ways, is often taken to mean the system of ideas that form the basis of political and economic theories and policies, and is characteristic of a given group, social class or individual. Arguably the most interesting conception of ideology is the Marxian conception of false consciousness based on group identification with specific economic interests. Ideological false-consciousness is ingredient in national policy of many nations-states. Important instances of ideology in recent American military history include the so-called domino theory which was not a cause but an important explanatory factor fallaciously tending to justify the Vietnamese War and the infamous weapons of mass destruction cynically invoked by the Bush Administration to justify the present Iraqi War. No one pretends that the domino theory caused the Vietnamese War nor that WMD caused the Iraqi War though in each case a myth which was
later discredited was an important enabling factor in carrying out the conflict.

[Huntington argues that economic factors are now less important than before. Since he does not eliminate economics entirely, he is on better ground than such thinkers as Heidegger and Habermas who simply leave it behind in their respective efforts to explain history through a supposed turn away from being or through communicative action. Huntington’s thesis that in the contemporary world economics is not primary, and is specifically subordinated to cultural factors which have emerged roughly since the Second World War. If this is correct, then either economics was never a primary factor, or at least the emergence of large cultural entities like the West, China, and the Arab countries has significantly shifted the causal development of the modern world away from economics, including economic development.]

[My counter hypothesis is that economic factors are not now and have not recently become less important but rather that as the result of the change of the historical subject from nation states which emerged after the French Revolution to large cultural entities after the Second World War economic interests are increasingly expressed in other ways, for instance in supra-national entities such as the Common Market.]

[The relative role of economic factors, which Huntington saw as diminished, in any case less important than the clash of cultures more than a decade ago, is not born out by more recent conflicts. The Iraqi War, which only occurred because George Bush’s desires were sufficiently important to set the war machine in motion, is a good example. This war is regarded as rationally justified, hence, if reasons are causes, caused so to speak, by a list of factors including regime change, concern for the Iraqi people, weapons of mass destruction, the security of Israel, a commitment to rightwing political beliefs held by Paul Wolfowitz, Douglas Feith and other self-styled neo-cons, and access to oil.]

[These proposed justifications are obviously very different. The commitment to regime change is a euphemism for the US practice when it finds it convenient of attempting to replace any government it finds inimical to its interests, broadly conceived. An instance, despite repeated public commitments to democracy, is the US role in the overthrow of Allende in Chili and subsequent support of Pinochet. The concept of weapons of mass destruction, in which some administration officials may once have believed, later functioned as a kind of ideological smokescreen to justify a war which, once the Iraqis predictably failed to welcome American soldiers with flowers, has never gone according to plan. The issue of the security of Israel blends together support for a historical ally and client state with what, for right-wing Christians, is frequently a religious commitment. The interest in the overthrow of Iraq by a number of neo-cons in the early 1990s was an item on the agenda which could be realized in the ‘space’ created after 9/11. Access to Iraqi oil is the clearest economic and probably single most important economic reason for going to war.]

ignore the access to fossil fuels or to reduce all other explanatory factors simply to expressions of an underlying economic dimension. It seems obvious that the concern with oil, which is apparent in other Bush administration policies, turns on the desire for a reliable but inexpensive source in the face of increasing American requirements, Chinese demands for fossil fuel as its economy expands, worries about the possible diminution of available supplies, lack of an obvious alternative, the influence of the price of oil on the domestic economy, and so on.

[21] There is an important difference between the present and prior role of economics as an explanatory factor in historical phenomena and its likely future function in an evolving world. Huntington, who is concerned with understanding the future in terms of the present, and who is cognizant of global affairs, global politics, global security issues, has nothing to say about arguably the single most important issue: economic globalism. The steady expansion of so-called free-enterprise market economy, or capitalism, is a salient, singularly important phenomenon in the contemporary world, which we disregard at our peril. It is fair to say that probably no important economic phenomenon develops in independence of the interlocking network of economic interests whose links are based, not on the self-expansion of capital, but rather on the voluntary acquiescence of those who control the present market economy who effortlessly unite against those who submit to its dictates. At least since Descartes modern philosophy has insisted that the subject is in time, but not of time, magically free of all constraint. Yet all of us are children of our own historical moment, which is increasingly dominated by economic interests extending around the world that never hesitate to bend anything that stands in their way to their combined economic will. The illusion that any of the main contemporary social activities is somehow independent of the underlying economic matrix is merely one of the more enduring but quaint forms of contemporary self-delusion.

3 Two forms of the religious thesis

[22] Huntington’s theory offers a large scale explanatory matrix invented for other purposes which need not but can be applied to 9/11. The religious approach takes the form of an ad hoc theory, invented for this particular purpose, according to which 9/11 can be understood a clash between two different religions, Islam, which is essentially ill adapted to the modern world, and Christianity, which is more or less up to date. Thus Lewis argues that the Islamic world tried but did not succeed in adjusting to the modern world, by which he means the West.

[23] What I will be calling the religious thesis is a local version of the conviction that in the final analysis everything, or virtually everything, can be explained on religious grounds. This thesis is easily comprehended since an uncritical commitment to a form of religion is clearly one of the factors driving both the Islamic side, especially the nebulous enemy which, at least in the West, is identified as Al Qaeda, as well as the present policies of the United States.

[24] American politics has long been in thrall to a deeply felt Christian impulse, which is not basically at odds but rather agrees with the role of Christianity
throughout the short history of the American republic. The effort to separate church and state in the US has never born its fruits, not least because a basic allegiance to Christian religion is enshrined in its founding documents, for instance in statements in the Declaration of Independence that ‘all men are created equal’ and that ‘they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights.’ The American claim for and effort to separate church and state, religion and politics, which arose out of the American Revolution, contrasts with the French Revolution, which it did much to inspire, but which in a largely Catholic country succeeded to a much greater extent in actually separating religion and politics, church and state.

In reflecting on the relation between religion and democracy in America, one does well to separate sentiment expressed for public consumption, such as commitments to democracy, equality, and equal opportunity from longstanding practices. The hollowness of such commitments when viewed against actual American practice, including the holding of slaves and the form of genocide waged against the indigenous Indian tribes, should not obscure an explicit commitment to religion as central for the American version of democracy.

Public opinions polls suggest that Americans are overwhelmingly committed to Christianity, though what that means varies considerably according to the group in question. The present situation in the US is marked by a steady decline of Roman Catholicism for a variety of reasons and the rise of varieties of Protestantism, especially so-called born again, or evangelical, Christians who atypically, unlike other Americans, including other Christians, regard their religious commitment as central to their lives.

The connection between religion and democracy in America is hardly news. It was already noted by Tocqueville when he came to the US in the 1830s. It is often noted that Tocqueville’s understanding of democracy differs from the way it has traditionally been understood in the US. The American form of democracy, often described as ‘government of the people by the people’, is very different from the elimination of privileges and class order in France through the abolition of the ancien régime. The present crusade to spread what is called democracy and freedom reaches back in American history to the concept of manifest destiny, which is probably a distant version of the Old Testament idea of God’s special covenant with the Jews, and which emerged during the 1840s. Manifest destiny was meant to justify the expansion across the continent to the West in response to a high birth rate, the economic depressions in 1818 and 1839, and the search for cheap land. Naturally, manifest destiny excluded peoples judged incapable of realizing American democracy, such as American Indians and those of non-European origin, including slaves imported from Africa. In its present incarnation, the manifest destiny of the only remaining superpower is understood as permitting, indeed requiring, the extension of democracy around the world.

In view of the close link between religion and democracy in the United States, the emergence of a religious analysis of what in the US is regarded as an attack on the American way of life, hence on democracy, is hardly surprising. What seems to be new is the suggestion that 9/11 is due to an alleged difference between a particular religion and the modern world.

_Ars Disputandi_ 6 (2006), [http://www.ArsDisputandi.org](http://www.ArsDisputandi.org)
This argument currently exists in popular and more scholarly forms. The non-scholarly, popular argument, which the Bush administration sometimes pushes, and which apparently reflects the President’s own religious penchant, is a typically Manichean, dualistic analysis, opposing good and evil, our religion and theirs, one fundamentalism to another, on the assumption that evangelical Christianity is deeply attuned to democracy (and freedom), a thesis explicitly supported by Lewis[5] to which fundamentalist Islam, or Islam in all its varieties is deeply opposed.

The Bush administration casts itself in the role of the good guarantor of democracy which it must spread in order to avoid its defeat by the forces of evil incarnated by Islam. Yet there is no reason to think Christianity in general or as instantiated by the Bush administration is particularly friendly to democracy. Democracy of all kinds is always based on respect for individual human beings, or the people (demos). A lack of respect for democracy has become the hallmark of an administration which refuses to respect the Geneva Conventions, which disrespects the United Nations when it finds that advantageous, which goes to war when and where it chooses, which holds prisoners indefinitely without regard to legal rights, which allows or even encourages the types of abuses which became known at Abu Ghraib, which ‘renders’ prisoners to other countries knowing they will be tortured, and so on. Further the general idea that a mad Saudian, originally an adept of Wahabism, but deeply critical of contemporary forms of Islam, would devote time, resources and energy to attacking the US merely because he favors Islam and dislikes Christianity seems far-fetched, a mere political fairy tale on the level of WMD or mobile weapons laboratories.

Lewis, who is obviously better aware of the Middle East than the members of the Bush government, proposes a more nuanced form of the religious argument. He argues that the root problem is the steadily increasing Western domination over the entire Islamic world, which is perceived as incompatible with Islam. Lewis seems to have two distinct claims in mind. One is that the specificity of the Islamic religion has historically prevented the Islamic world from modernizing, and the other is that the very attachment to Islam by religious Muslims generates tremendous hostility toward the West.

Lewis seems to be claiming that if only the latter countries had succeeded in adapting to the modern world, there would not have been any conflict with the West. The difficulty in this line of argument is that the deeper cause of the Islamic attack on the West remains inexplicable. It makes eminent good sense to believe that after the US attacked and occupied Afghanistan and Iraq, and in effect threatened to occupy other Middle Eastern countries in order to change the map of the region so to speak, local Muslim groups would be very annoyed and in some cases ready to fight to expel the US and its allies. It makes no sense at all to suggest that by itself the inability to modernize pushed Islam to attack Western bastions of Christianity.

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[5] ‘President Bush was careful to stress that this was not a war against Islam or Muslims, nor against any particular ethnic group or country, but a war against a criminal conspiracy, waged in defence of human decency.’ Lewis, What Went Wrong?, p. 163.
4 On economics, politics and religion

The modern world has been and is still being shaped by a number of factors, including politics, religion, and economics. I believe that politics, religion and economics influence each other, but that in the final analysis economics plays a non-quantifiable, but deeper role. If economics is the main motor of the modern world, then it, and not differences in culture, civilization and religion is also the most likely way to understand the events leading up to 9/11, 9/11 itself and the subsequent events.

As concerns historical events, we can never go beyond interpretation. I am not suggesting we should eliminate other factors, such as ideology or even personal pique—the Iraqis tried to assassinate my father. Yet my hypothesis is that the economic development of the modern world leading up to what is now called globalization forms a single process which can be regarded both as the main, or at least the most important single cause of the terrorist acts on 9/11 as well as of the ongoing response to it.

Everything is happening as if 9/11 and the reaction to it are two sides of the same coin, two aspects of a single underlying process which can be regarded both as the main cause of the terrorist attack on the US as well as of the ongoing response to that attack.

I have no intention of denying that Islam’s failure to modernize has generated tensions with the West. This piece of information explains a hatred of the West but not attacks on it before the US and its allies began to occupy Afghanistan and Iraq. I believe a stronger explanation appears if we recall the economic dimension of the conflict between the Islamic countries and the West. But what if the problem were not that Islam is unable to modernize, jealous of the West, envious of what it has accomplished in the modern period, but rather concerned to protect a very different way of life it perceived as threatened by the West? And what if the West, oblivious to the nature of the Muslim world, were simply demonizing it while continuing to develop the economic attack on the Islamic way of life that Muslims regard as the problem.

My argument depends on calling attention to the economic dimension of the modern social world. The economic, political, religious and ethical dimensions of the social and historical context are clearly interrelated. One cannot be reduced to the other, but in general the economic dimension is deeper and more important, hence exerts a determining influence on such other factors as religion and politics.

My hypothesis is that in the modern world, the development of capitalism results in the increasing encroachment of economics, in a word the economic penetration of virtually the entire world by variations on a single capitalist model which manifests itself throughout all the dimensions of the human world. In the final analysis, this and this alone explains 9/11, which, rather than simply due to an opposition between different forms of civilization, or to an aversion to democracy, or again to a failed effort to modernize, rather represents a conflict generated by the extension of liberal capitalism throughout the world in the process popularly known as globalization, resulting in a direct threat to any cultural formation re-
sistant to its dictates. Though other factors play role, I believe that both the initial terrorist attacks on the US, and the ongoing US (and allied) responses within the context of so-called war on terror can best be understood against the background of the continued expansion of global capitalism.

[39] This approach has the advantage of including both what for many is the initial event as well as later events within a single explanatory framework. It further avoids the otherwise insuperable difficulty which arises if 9/11 is regarded as an event without antecedents, causa sui as it were, which makes it literally inexplicable. One way to put the point is that what is often currently depicted as a struggle between forces of Islam and of Christianity is due less to religious differences but rather to the inability of modern liberal economy, within which Christianity is mainly embedded, to refrain from transforming every instance of difference into the same, in turn provoking a defensive response. Though I have no intention of condoning terrorism, what in the West is understood as an offensive first-strike can be better understood as a defensive strike, and what in the West is described as a response of good to evil is more plausibly grasped as a manifestation of the ongoing expansion of free market economy.

[40] The unbridled evolution of capitalism makes it difficult to resist the tendency to take economic expansion itself, what Adam Smith presciently already understood as the invisible hand in the second half of the eighteenth century as capitalism was emerging, as answering the concern to realize the humanism implicit in Enlightenment rationalism. Yet many think that as the iron cage grows ever tighter and real social mobility steadily decreases, we are not moving closer to but further away from realizing a meaningful form of the Enlightenment goal of humanism. This problem is central to the European Union. At stake in this historical experiment is not only peace between neighbors on the same continent, but whether it is possible to institute a social form of market economy as a realistic alternative to the anti-social alternative system of market economy which prevails in the US. In part, the ratification of the treaty creating the European Constitution turns on whether the population of the different European countries really believes in the social promise of the new economic market or rather thinks this is merely yet another promise which simply will not or cannot be kept in the framework of the Common Market.

[41] The effect of economic globalization on religion, politics and ethics should not be underestimated. Though I am not qualified to judge, I note that Lewis depicts the Islamic world as a place in which religion literally takes the place of politics. Certainly in the West, over the centuries religion has often been transformed into a handmaiden of politics only to function as a direct political ally, never more so than in contemporary America, when a Pope tacitly endorsed Bush’s reelection campaign while overlooking the Iraqi War because the candidate endorsed the Church’s anti-abortion stance. In this case, the ethical core of religion, the repudiation of a war which according to the venerable Christian view of just war is unjust seems simply to have given way to political expediency. This case

6. See the European Constitution, Articles 1–3, esp. article 3.
is one of many in which Christianity in our time seems to be reduced toward a kind of rear-guard action in defending itself in two main ways: first, by simply contradicting, as the logical continuation of the condemnation of modernity, any departure from pre-modern views; and, second, in undertaking a kind of counter-reformation through the wholesale reversal of changes instituted by Vatican II.

5 Toward a constructivist ethics

[42] Religion cannot be recovered by simply decrying the modern world as a time of barbarism in which human beings, in drawing further from God, or in having turned away from being, have somehow lost their way. Politics, to be meaningful, must find a way to transform capitalism, which, after the sudden disappearance of the Soviet Union, and the irremediable decline of Marxism, is now the single system, to the advantage of human beings. If philosophy, which once claimed to be indispensable for the good life, is to play a significant role, it must find a way to provide meaningful answers to existential questions which already engaged Socrates.

[43] I do not pretend to know what the correct role for religion might be now. Yet I agree with Dewey that the time is past in which it could legitimately pretend to orient life in the West, and that this role is now better played by an experimental system of values. Yet ethics needs to be recovered if it is to be more than a philosophical curiosity of a by-gone age. There is a legitimate question now of what a reasonable view of ethics could look like not only after 9/11, but in modern times where we lack a large-scale ethical theory corresponding to a situation dominated by the increasing, unprecedented extension of liberal capitalism throughout the entire globe.

[44] In the space at my disposal, I would like to suggest the interest of a constructivist approach to ethics for the contemporary situation. This idea has been touched on in different ways by such writers as Hayek who rejects it, and Rawls who discusses it in connection with Kant. This theme is also related to the debate between Rawls and Habermas. In the space at my disposal, I will exploit an ambiguity in Kant’s theory of knowledge—it is both representationalist and constructivist—to suggest a constructivist approach to ethics. By representationalism, I mean a theory of knowledge based on the analysis of the relation of a representation to a mind-independent external object. This approach supposes that cognitive objects can be uncovered, discovered, or found. By constructivism I mean a theory of knowledge based on the idea that cognitive objects are produced, constructed or made. A representationalist approach to knowledge leads to apodictic determinations of what is, whereas constructivism allows no more than the construction of a framework to grasp the contents of experience subject to revision through further experience.

[45] Since ethics is a kind of knowledge, there is a link between theories of ethics and theories of knowledge, a link which Kant above all exploits in his parallel analyses of both domains. In Socrates’ wake, the normative Platonic view of knowledge as resting on a grasp of what is as it is led to ethical absolutism.
In the West, versions of this idea are enshrined in both religion and philosophy, in religion in conviction that authorized interpreters know God’s true view, in philosophy in the idea that to know is to know what is as it is, leading to the conception of ethics as yielding right and wrong answers true universally and necessarily for all rational beings.

[46] It is too late to argue for an adamantine link between the true and the good since other than through authority or faith, there is no way to determine what is true of the world as it is. More than a century ago Peirce invented American pragmatism in showing that the real, by which he meant ontological reality, what is now more often called the object of metaphysical realism, is not accessible either through authority, empiricism, or Cartesian rationalism but is rather constructed as the result of a pragmatic process of investigation by the group of scientific investigators.

[47] In the same way as epistemology, ethics, which depends on the surrounding context – that is the main difference between ethics and morality – does not and cannot yield more than provisional answers. It is as mistaken to believe knowledge consists in knowing mind-independent reality as it is as to believe the question of what we should do can be answered in a final, necessary and universally binding way. To be meaningful, an ethics for our time must be constructed in a way which respects our time, hence which reflects who we are, including the values we are committed to individually and collectively.

[48] Epistemological as well as ethical disputes are provisionally adjudicated in reference to a shared conceptual framework. As concerns knowledge, the different cognitive disciplines constantly negotiate the framework within which this is possible. In ethics, this is more difficult since anything like a shared ethical vision no longer holds sway. As has been pointed out, one lesson of 9/11 is that this is the case between Muslims and Christians. Yet after the disintegration of a shared vision of the world which, at least in the West no longer holds sway, the same difficulty also holds sway between Europeans and Americans, and even between Americans. Europe and America are sharply divided around what is sometimes described as a difference between a European commitment to community solidarity, peace in the world, and longterm development as distinguished from an American commitment to individualism, materialism and religion. A main current European preoccupation is for Common Market to preserve the commitment to a social conception of economics that in European eyes distinguishes them from the US.

[49] In the absence of anything resembling a single overriding vision, we are reduced to solving problems on a case by case basis in appealing to what we do share, in which different individuals and groups recognize themselves.

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Individuals belong to groups, which in turn belong countries increasingly linked together by supranational organizations. For such relations to be meaningful, at every level individuals, groups of various kinds and finally countries with disparate interests must recognize themselves. Just as a marriage in which one does not, or no longer recognizes oneself is not, or is no longer meaningful, so membership in groups, including supranational organizations such as the United Nations, is no longer meaningful for a country that does not find its interests, aspirations and beliefs reflected in the actions, proclamations and decisions of that organization. Ethics should not be construed as a system of rules to be set down once and for all but rather as a process consisting in the formulation of policies against the background of whatever common framework exists of solutions through negotiation on a case by case basis. Agreement reached is not and should not be conflated with truth, but it is the best we can do under the circumstances in a which no single overriding vision pertains.

6 Conclusion: Before and After 9/11: Religion, Politics, and Ethics

I come now to my conclusion. In the modern world and increasingly in recent times, religion, politics and ethics are interrelated within a deeper economic matrix they influence and by which they are influenced. Politics seems increasingly to reflect economic imperatives and religion to have forfeited its ethical core in part for existential imperatives. At least on the religious side of the equation, this leaves an inability to deal with the future other than by denouncing the present in the name of the past. An instance among many is the suggestion that we are now moving toward what Cardinal Ratzinger recently called ‘a dictatorship of relativism . . . that recognizes nothing definite and leaves only one’s own ego and one’s own desires as the final measure.’ Ratzinger’s condemnation of ethical relativism, which he rejects but seems not to understand, rests on a prior commitment to ethical absolutism, roughly the same ethical absolutism also accepted by that other contemporary fundamentalist George Bush, which can be accepted on faith but which cannot be rationally defended. My own view is that ethical relativism, which need have nothing to do with one’s ego or desires, is not more but rather less dangerous than traditional ethical absolutism, ignorant claims to know absolutely based on blind faith. It is too late to pretend that on the basis of a shared ethical vision one can discern, deduce or otherwise identify ethical absolutes for all people in all times and places. If we acknowledge our fragile historical condition, we can do no better than seek to construct an ethics for our time on the basis of whatever common ground we can detect between us in the historical moment we contingently happen to inhabit, and which finally provides the best hint about how to orient ourselves in this time of terrorism.