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Dear Colleague:

Morality rests on three pillars: religion, reason, and love. In the West, the pillar of religion has crumbled. It has given us a set of values--in particular, the exaltation of the human individual (as a child of God and made in His image)--that still sustains the humane practices and institutions of the West. But how long these values will continue, as their metaphysical and religious bases corrode, is anyone's guess.

The second pillar, that of reason, stands on the following type of argument. I desire respect from my fellow humans. This respect must not rest solely or even chiefly on my good looks and talent, for such qualities are too vulnerable to the accidents of fate and fortune. If I am to feel truly secure, the respect that is given me must rest, ultimately, on the bare fact that I am a human being. But if this is the case, reason dictates that I recognize the same desire in others and that I grant the same respect to others. The mutual respect that ensues provides a sound basis for morality. Unfortunately, reasoning of this kind, even when its point of departure is an emotion (desire), has little force. We must therefore turn to the next pillar--that of love.

Young children look up to their parents, putting them, as it were, on pedestals of virtue. Parents, if they really love their young, are compelled by them to be good--to be truly good, and not a mere semblance of it, for parents would not want their children to adore pretense. Moreover, parents who truly love their young tend to assume a religious perspective, no matter how loud their claim to agnosticism or atheism. From a psychological point of view, a doting parent cannot look upon a sleeping child and not see in that life a destiny beyond biology and society.

So, although religion in the West may be in rapid decline and although reason cannot by itself be a source of passionate commitment to virtue, moral life may well endure a while. Strange, isn't it? to think that the moral order of the secular West will increasingly rest on the shoulders of children--these same children who giggle, shout, and bash one another as they tumble out of the yellow school bus.

Best wishes,

