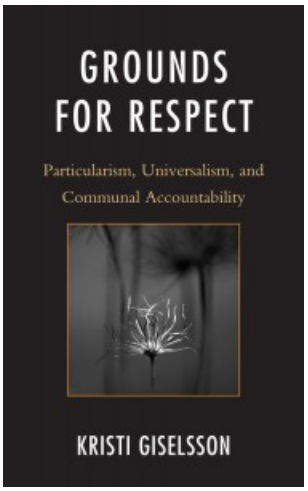
# Review: Grounds for Respect




It's taken me a while to digest this book by local academic and author, Kristi Giselsson. Kristi is a compassionate and articulate philosopher who has made balanced and thoughtful contributions to the public debate on a number of social issues recently.

This book *Grounds for Respect: Particularism, Universalism, and Communal Accountability* is a published version of her doctoral thesis in philosophy at the University of Tasmania. It is an exploration of "the question of what grounds are needed in order to justify respect for others." (Page 1). This is a fundamental question, the diverse answers to which contribute a great deal to the unspoken (and often unknown) assumptions that shape and guide the cross-purposed conversations that epitomise public dialogue.

Giselsson's contribution is to explore this using philosophical analysis and critique. This necessarily involves a philosopher talking about philosophers, because that is how such an analysis works: positions are described, clarified, analysed for their differences; their implications are drawn, their internal and external logic put under test; and finally a path of good thought and good conscience is found through the heady tangle of these broad-shouldered giants.

For myself, this was my first introduction to this level of philosophical treatise. I came to the book motivated by the practical and socio-political applications: when you're talking about personhood issues such as abortion, euthanasia, marriage, freedom of speech and so on, then the nature and basis of *respect* is of significant relevance. I was struck, however, by the philosophical exploration itself.

I have only had one experience like it, when I first studied church history in my BMin studies, suddenly I had insight into where people where coming from, what motivated them, and why. Similarly, Giselsson's exploration of the pedigree of philosophical thought, the sort of thought that is currently and actively applied in our Western World, gave me new insights. It also made me thirsty to learn more, hence my current little project.

Giselsson's thesis is that "some form of *universalism* is needed to ground respect for the particular; in order to justify why we should respect others" (Page 2). Universalism is the sense of *moral universalism* which asserts that there is a particular system of standard, morality or ethic that can be applied universally and which is not contingent on the particulars of a person (e.g. their rationality or autonomy). Giselsson also emphasises a foundational *humanism* as a necessary aspect of our notions of respect. This is "humanism" as an affirmation of an innate, non-contingent, ontological, and unique reality (and value) of the human person.

The form of Giselsson's argument therefore includes an exploration and ultimate rebuttal of posthumanist philosophers such as Derrida, Foucalt and Lyotard (all of whom I now want to read for myself).

> *…posthumanist critiques of universalist assumptions within humanism are themselves based on unacknowledged ethical assumptions of universal value and respect for others… (Page*

*2)*

> *…at the very heart of Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard's critique of humanism lay a moral judgment; that universalism is inherently unjust in its apparent exclusion of particular others… this ethical judgment is made without recourse to any justificatory philosophical grounds, but rather relies on the force of its rhetorical – and ultimately humanist – appeal alone. This ethical rejection of universal humanism has in turn had an enormous impact over a wide range of disciplines, but specifically in those areas of scholarship that deal with those traditionally marginalized within Western philosophy…" (Page 117)*

The broad brush strokes of the argument might be characterised by breadth and depth. This first part of the book is a consideration of depth – is anything less than universalism enough to provide a coherent basis for respect? Giselsson shows that posthumanism either fails to provide for respect, or where it asserts its claim that it can, it has actually slipped into the universalism (albeit usually of a less caricatured sort) that is trying to be avoided.

The second part of the book looks at the breadth question and therefore tests the bounds of humanism. In particular, could animals be included as "human" to the extent that respect can be both encapsulated and applied? This second consideration tests utilitarian approaches such as that of Singer. Giselsson shows that while a utilitarian approach looks to assess a person's particular characteristics or functions to justify respect, a humanist approach asserts common ontological or innate grounds that are more robust.

By way of example:

> *Dismissive views of the elderly and those suffering from dementia are only affirmed by utilitarian principles that emphasize the greater good of society and the*

> *comparative worthlessness of a cognitively impaired life. (Page 175)*

Having drawn the broad boundaries. Giselsson turns to those who thinking is within the bounds of universalist humanism and examines their formulation for grounds for respect. The thread being followed here is not the extent of human being but the characteristics – self-determination, self-creativity, accountability, subjecthood and the like are all explored. She finds them wanting for her purposes:

> *I have also argued that current Western liberal and humanist theories that attempt to readdress the foundations needed for universal respect still conceptualize these grounds in terms of what characteristics an individual must possess in order to qualify for equal moral consideration. These grounds still revolve around traditional notions of moral personhood, these being selfdetermination, rationality and autonomy; and they inevitably exclude all humans not possessing such qualities. (Page 259)*

Giselsson therefore posits her own formulation of human being, which has to do not with biology or economic characteristics but with our "*way* of being" (Page 260). She therefore emphasises *community* as a necessary and innate part of human personhood and demonstrates that a concept for respect can rest upon the operation of accountability within and from the human community. She explores this conception for inconsistencies and negative implications and concludes:

> *The ontological foundation I have offered, while partial rather than complete in its conception, seeks to balance the tension between particularism and universalism by showing a structure of human morality that is irreducibly communal in its practice. Moreover, while arguing that the inter-dependent practices of social standards of value and reciprocal accountability are thoroughly communal in nature,*

> *the universal standard of value implied by the assumption of reciprocal accountability – that each human is an end in themselves – ensures that justice is not reduced to communal consensus alone, as this standard provides for the possibility of respect for particular individuals beyond the relative nature of localized and particular norms (Page 296)*

The foundation that Giselsson offers is indeed "partial rather than complete" because while she circumscribes respect with the well-argued conception of communal accountability she stops short, understandably, before filling that notion with articulations of what particular behaviours or attitudes or beliefs might be worthy of being held to account. Therefore, while she has demonstrated grounds for respect without recourse to divine revelation, I question whether she could build upon those grounds without doing so.

This book took some time to digest. It made me realise how little I know and how much I need to know about the philosophical tendrils that generate and move the values and people of our society. There is so much lack of respect, belligerence and assertions and misuse of one another in Western Society. Much of it comes from those sections of society who espouse care and tolerance and love yet find it so hard to articulate respect and understanding and community outside of their own narrow bands.

This book has made me thirsty to know more, to explore in particular some of the 20th Century philosophers who influenced the current generation of culture-shapers. To that end this book has whet my appetite. And that makes it a good book!

---

# Q&A: Does 1 Tim 4:10… provide an escape clause for humanists?

**Reverend Mother** asks: *Tim 1,ch 4, v 10 says "….who is the Saviour of all men and especially of those who believe…" Is this the verse to quote to people who have lost a non-believer… or perhaps an escape clause for humanists?*

Thanks for the question. The text of 1 Tim 4:10 in its most immediate context is (ESV):

> *8 For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. 9 This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. 10 That is why we labor and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Saviour of all people, and especially of those who believe.*

But to begin with, some basic principles: Your question is an exegetical one. That is to say, it is asking for an interpretation, an "get-meaning-out" question. Good exegesis attempts to disrobe the reader of current frameworks and asks the question "What did this mean for the person to whom it was originally communicated?" Once that question has been considered the question of "so what does it mean for me (or for a humanist etc.)" can be asked, and hopefully answered, to some extent.

We must give attention to semantical range of words. We know what *we* mean by, for instance, the word "Saviour" but is that the meaning that is intended? Paul, who wrote the original letter, knew nothing of modern day humanism. And before we collide a passage with a specific question such as "Does this

comfort those who have lost a person of no faith?" we have to consider whether or not the text is actually relevant to that question at all.

In my mind the sticking point is the phrase "Saviour of all people?" What does this mean? Do the applications you suggest apply?

The word "Saviour" is in the original Greek σωτὴρ which certainly means "saviour" or "deliverer" but also "preserver." It is a word that applies to the general sense of divine preservation of human life and the providential giving of all that is required for sustenance. It is telling that the word references the sense of God's preservation in the OT, but it is not a word that applies to the messianic figures of David (and others) where the more specific sense of "salvation" in terms of rescue or vicarious victory is present. Jesus is the first "Messiah" to also be "Saviour."

The word "Saviour" implies an object – who or what is actually saved? The natural object is "the world." When we talk about "the Saviour of the World" we do not intend some sort of exhaustive/universalist scope (in terms of individuals) the scope of the meaning is two-fold: this person has the capacity to save the world; this world has a Saviour, it is this person.

Therefore, based on this lexical analysis, my conclusion would be that the phrase "Saviour of all people" does not imply a universalism. It implies that Jesus has the divine attributes of being "saviour/preserver/benefactor" of all people.

This conclusion is supported by looking at the immediate context. What is the purpose of this passage? Well, in verse 8, the direct point is to encourage godliness. This godliness is like "physical training" which has benefit both for the "present life" and the "life to come." In fact, through godliness, we could say we are saved/preserved for this life

and the next.  The argument that is being made is that the godliness is worth pursuing (for salvation/preservation) because it is shaped around the character, nature and demonstration of the one who saves and preserves.  We strive for godliness because we hope/trust in this Saviour, even to the extent of recognise the preserving benefit of following Christ's example in this life.

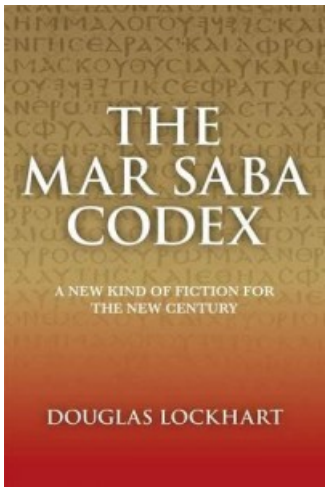
However, for those whose hope in Christ extends to the eschatological hope of belonging to the age to come (the more specific sense of "salvation") there is even more reason to pursue the path of godliness because it is the path that pertains to the preservation of *eternal* life.  Thus, in my opinion, the original audience of 4:10 would have heard something like this: *godliness is good for all people because it pertains to the preservation of all people in this world, and it is especially good for those who believe, because it especially pertains to the "life to come."*

How, then, does this apply to the applications you suggest?

a) Escape clause for humanists?  Well, yes and no.  It confirms the value of "godliness" for present-day preservation of human life.  I think the Pope said something similar recently about the value of "good works" even the "good works" of atheists.  Such good works are, well, good.  Does that give them an "escape" – well, perhaps.

b) Comfort those who have lost a person with no faith?  Perhaps, depending on the person.  I would think that passages that refer to the holiness and justice and compassion of God would be of more application.

# Review: The Mar Saba Codex




Within the first few weeks of my moving to Hobart I happened to find myself at a book launch that someone had pointed out to me in the local newspaper. The event involved a local author writing on religious issues, and it also involved wine and a professor of philosophy at the nearby university. It intrigued me enough to go. The speech by the author, Douglas Lockhart, exhorted the church to redefine itself and its doctrine to be more reasonable, and intrigued me enough to buy the ebook.

There is a companion volume of philosophical theory and *The Mar Saba Codex* was consequently touted as being fast-paced, suspenseful, with interesting characters in interesting places. Although I wasn't expecting anything Dan Brown-esque I was hoping to find something with some grip and engagement. I was a little disappointed. The characters are monochrome, the plot somewhat-stagnant, and the eventual suspense anticlimactic. I realised I was reading what could only be called a "narrative philosophy" – a sequence of dialogues loosely tied together around a mythical motif that attempts to espouse the benefits of a form of humanism that feels it necessary to demand the second mile from the Christian church and the borrowed guise of the Christian cloak. I feel no need to read the companion volume.

The narrative is wrapped around the finding of a letter written by an early bishop called *Theophilus*. The letter affirms an understanding of Jesus that underplays (eliminates?) the divine, eschews trinitarian theology, and embraces a somewhat-non-theistic somewhat-Jewish human messianicism. As we are introduced to the main characters – in particular Jack Duggan, a former priest-in-training, ongoing ancient-text expert and now disgruntled journalist –

this letter is set up as a touchstone against dogmatism, absolutism, and revelatory epistemology – as if the divinity of Christ somehow is the cornerstone for all that is wrong with the Christian religion.

For instance,

> *"I gave up believing in belief a long time ago." Duggan was faintly dismissive, "It's about power and very little else…"*
>
> *"Choice is by definition heresy," said Mayle, reminding Duggan of an ancient truth, "You can't have choice if truth is a fixed entity. You either believe, or you do not believe."*
>
> *In Paul's hands, the term 'Christos' has been used to create a God-man, a theologically inflated figure that even in Theodore's day, had generated bitter conflict for Christians and pagans alike.*
>
> *In the Nazoraen view, which was the Aposotolic view, Jesus had not been the Second Person in a divine trinity… Only later… has this act of believing in Jesus been transformed by St. Paul into the magical rite of salvation through faith alone.*

I did begin to wonder if Lockhart was going to simply use the characters' voices to tear down.  It is one thing to fight against an edifice – but is it from a substantive philosophy that can build in its place?  There are hints at the beginning that become explicit at the end – a subjective, experiential, humanism is Lockhart's answer

> *"Faith is more than knowing doctrine and Church teachign ; it is discovering God in experience and allowing experience to inform conscience."*
>
> *"The 'I Am' of your being is not in place. 'Recognize what is before your eyes, and what is hidden will be revealed to*

> *you.' That's a quote from the Gospel of Thomas. The person who wrote those words was wide awake…. It's the Christianity behind the Christianity. It's what's been lost to doctrinalized Christianity for centuries."*

And all this is well and good, I guess. Lockhart is a decent writer and a stimulating intellect. I could enjoy engaging with his ideas in their own right. But why this task of whiteanting them into Christian spirituality – a spirituality that he doesn't seem to grasp? He sees no positive in engaging with the bible as revelation, the sense of dependence on God is assumed to be stultifying and imprisoning, not releasing and freeing as so many have found it to be.

In the midst of all the voices – which I take to be Lockhart's own because they all sound so similar – the crux of the issue, becomes the point.

> *"God had never at any time worked miracles to make up for human deficiency."*

Lockhart's philosophy, then, like all humanism, is a gospel only to the elite, the intellectually rigorous (for some definition of that) – the well able, the unbroken, the self-actualised – the non-deficient. In reality, the outcome of such a framework is the fruit of selfish selves. We *do* have a human deficiency, without God working miracles, there is no answer from humanism in the real world.

Perhaps this is why I found the story ultimately unreal. From the depiction of an Anglican Archbishop of Sydney – the sort of character I know quite well in my real world – that is simply strange, to a plotline involving an AWOL pope that requires a shark to be jumped. Maybe it was just because all the typos continously broke down the fourth wall.

But it was a good stimulation. It caused thoughtfulness on my

part. It demonstrates an expertise and an academic studiousness that I do not and can not match. At the book launch Douglas Lockhart offered me a conversation over a glass of wine, or a decent whiskey. Perhaps I'll go find him and take up the offer.