

What Became of the Common Good?

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Limmud Festival 2022

1

How I Hope to Value Our 50 Mins.

- Thank you for coming!
- Share some background, define some terms, offer some ideas.
- Facilitate a discussion, based on the premise that we need to embed the Common Good firmly into our way forward locally and globally.
- NB I don't claim to be an 'expert', but I've tried to read, learn, and prepare.

2

What is the “Common Good”?

- Catholic doctrine: "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily" (*Gaudium et Spes*, n.26).
- Political Science: anything that benefits and is naturally shared by all members of a given community, compared to things that benefit the private good of individuals or sectors of society.
- U.S. Constitution Preamble: "promote the general welfare"
- Philosophy: From Aristotle (active citizens) to Machiavelli (virtuous citizens) Rousseau (active, voluntary citizens) to Rawls, Sandel, etc.

3

What Opposes The Common Good?

- In the modern era the emphasis has been placed on the maximization of the freedom of the individual, as consumer and property owner discovering that freedom in the private domain of liberalized markets rather than as citizen achieving the common good in the public domain. (Britannica.com)
- Power held by an 'in' group – aristocracy / landed gentry; oligarchy; one-party state.
- Belief that it is an unachievable goal – impossible to bridge the aims of diverse groups (e.g. is health more important than education? Etc.)
- The 'nationalisation of risk and the privatisation of gain'
- The broken free market capitalist system, of which in 2008, the then Governor of the Bank of England said: 'never in human history have so few owed so much to so many'.
- Thinking that the system is either Free Market (Hayek) or national State-regulated (Keynes).

4

The Tyranny of Merit - Michael Sandel

- Professor Michael Sandel's 2020 book
- How we've turned good fortune into 'just desserts'
- The rhetoric of 'rising'
- Credentialism – the power of the degree
- The 'naked' poor – are they getting their 'just desserts'?
- "I've earned it, I can keep it" – the hubris of merit
- "We have apparently become less and less caring for, or even aware of the suffering of, the most vulnerable in our society." (J. Neuberger, *The Moral State We're In* p.viii)

5

What's Jewish About the Common Good?

- Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Eternal One for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." (Jeremiah 29:7)
- God has told you, O human, what is good; and what does the Eternal One require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)
- If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when? (Avot 1:14)
- Do not separate yourself from the community (Avot 2:5)

6

What's Jewish About The Tension?

- Rabbi Nahman said in Rabbi Samuel's name: 'Behold, it was good' refers to the Good Desire; 'And behold, it was very good' refers to the Evil Desire. Can then the Evil Desire be very good? That would be extraordinary! But without the Evil Desire, however, no man would build a house, take a wife and beget children; and thus said Solomon: 'Again, I considered all labour and all excelling in work, that it is a man's rivalry with his neighbour.' (Ecclesiastes 4:4)
- Avram, Sarai and Hagar: "To me You have given no offspring..." (Genesis 15:3)

7

Overtaking This Tyranny (1)

- Restoring the dignity of work and workers.
- Replacing a narrow monetary view of success with broader significance of all people and contributions.
- Building a rigorous form of kindness, in which social and economic justice is embedded.
- Economic strategy based on resilience, not lowest cost.
- Updating our democracy – every vote counts; distributed power; etc.

8

Overturning This Tyranny (2)

- A commitment to the common good could bring us together and solve the deepest problems this country and the world now face: How do we work together? How do we treat each other, especially the poorest and most vulnerable? How do we take care of not just ourselves but also one another? (Jim Wallace, Time Magazine, 4th April 2013)
- ...humility is the beginning of the way back from the harsh ethic of success that divides us apart. It points beyond the tyranny of merit toward a less rancorous, more generous public life. (Michael Sandel, The Tyranny of Merit, p.227)