

Reflections on lofC's core values

Talk given at lofC-UK National Meeting, Saturday 4th October 2014 by Peter Riddell

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I am glad we can reflect together on lofC's core values, the 'four standards' - honesty, purity, unselfishness and love. That we are taking this theme indicates a renewed interest after a period of loss of confidence in them. I would like to offer some reasons why we should have confidence in them, and some reasons for the loss of confidence.

The standards have been a constant presence in my life for four and half decades - and a great gift for which I am more grateful than I can say. The internal audit of my life that I undertook in my late teens produced a list of hurts I had caused people around me. Doing what I could to ask forgiveness from those people, though painful, was ultimately a liberating experience. It gave me a taste of what it means to live with a clear conscience which, once experienced, I don't think you can forget.

And the prize is access to a source of inner guidance in which I have gradually learnt to put my security. I think of it as 'attentive living', when you are alive to the promptings of where to be and when, what to do and say - or not to say!

The 'four standards' are obviously not a complete moral code, but they were for me an introduction to the spiritual life at a time when I was contemptuous of religion. The Christian scriptures began to make sense to me as I began to understand what Jesus's disciples were experiencing as they lived next to someone who embodied those values.

They helped me develop the reflex of self-examination of my motives and behaviour, and compassion for others' struggles with their character; and the instinct in any conflict to look first at what wrong there may be on my side.

They led to an understanding that 'everyone has a next step' - articulated by the late Jean-Marc Duckert - that none of us is going to stay as we are now, and that we may have a part in helping others discover or fulfil their true potential.

I believe that this simple formulation of fundamental moral values is an extraordinarily important discovery for the age we live in, when humanity seems to be increasingly choosing identities that separate us from others. We know from decades of experience that these standards have the capacity to draw together people with very different world views in the search for guidance, and action, on matters of common concern. It is the basis of the global lofC network

and I experience it constantly through the work of the Agenda for Reconciliation team which meets in this building every week.

There I have seen these values through the eyes of people whose countries have collapsed through war, or are facing that possibility. I have realised that they are not just personal values, but antidotes to societal diseases: Purity, the antidote to sexual unfaithfulness and family breakdown; Unselfishness, to unbridled individualism and community breakdown; Honesty, to corruption and economic breakdown; and Love, the antidote to the fault-lines of ethnicity, religion, class which can destroy nations. When there is an imbalance in society, it is some people's calling to go to an opposite extreme in order to restore the balance. Frank Buchman, founder of IofC, once said that 'An extreme of evil has to be met by an extreme of good'.

So why we have been embarrassed by the 'four standards' or not known how to talk about them? I believe there were both external and internal reasons.

Among the external reasons are that they were developed in the very different context of post-First World War and pre- and post-Second World War Europe and their significance has less resonance in peace-time. When things were going reasonably well, we became complacent and ignorant of the value-foundations on which our stability is built - ignorant of the struggle to remoralise society after war - to establish or re-establish moral norms - that our grandparents' and parents' generations did so much to achieve. We could even be tempted to believe that we had cracked the secret of running a successful society, and that such values are redundant!

In the '70s when I was at university, the word 'moral' was taboo - it represented the prison from which everyone had just escaped! Freedom was the watchword and no one was going to take it away! I realise now that what we were seeing was the end of a militarised society which had suppressed individualism - and the lid of the kettle had just blown off!

By the '90s, Tony Blair's use of the word 'moral' in his successful election campaign signalled that the pendulum was swinging towards its rehabilitation. Probably, we were becoming aware that unfettered freedom left too many victims, and more recent economic shocks and the vision of countries collapsing within Europe's immediate neighbourhood are causing us all to become more thoughtful about the values that underpin stability.

But there are also internal reasons for our hesitancy in expressing the 'four standards' which relates to some of the ways they have been applied in IofC history.

At certain periods, they became rules about what was acceptable or not acceptable, for example in dress codes, in relationships, even in ways of laying tables! It led to people not feeling free or accepted. I am conscious of instances when I have allowed judgement of others' behaviour to override love.

I recently realised that I had come to think of the 'four standards' as a great wagging finger - a 'Thou shalt not!' It was when reflecting on Jesus's teaching recently, 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God', that I suddenly saw that it was actually a great promise that was being offered. And the prize is the clarity and peace of heart that comes from a 'giving' rather than a 'taking' spirit. They are a light to grow towards, rather than a stick to beat ourselves with. Some 'pruning' will no doubt be necessary, but as we grow towards that light we will be better able to help others to discover the riches of these ancient values for themselves.