

# ***A Brief Introduction to the Language of Spirit and Law Enforcement***

By Jeffrey G. Willetts, Ph.D.



*The Pentagon.*

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**F**or most of my life, my only association with law enforcement has occurred on the interstate highway system. Although I have served as a pastor for many years and as an academic dean at a theological seminary for a few more, I never really have known any law enforcement officers or understood much about the nature of their work. All of that changed, however, on September 11, 2001.

On that day, I sat in a friend's home not far from the seminary watching the horrors unfold on television. I live and work within a few miles of Washington, D.C., and, as events would have it, the images on television would not be confined to that medium. As we watched the tragedies unfold, wonder, astonishment, fear, and anger crept up on us as we held our collective breath. Shocked by proximity, audacity, and the sheer magnitude of events, the images, at first, appeared surreal, like a well-made television drama that had caught us all off guard.

## **An Unseen Force**

As the aftershock of those hours and then days began to permeate the psyche of our local community, clergy of all denominational affiliations started pondering what appropriate words and

deeds they should offer in terms of a legitimate and helpful response. Immediate attention turned to the families of those either lost or injured in the attacks and how best to minister to them. As the days and weeks went by, our community mourned, held memorial services, and ministered to the heartbroken families of the victims. What went decidedly and tragically unnoticed, however, was any acknowledgment of the effects of these events on the lives of those whose calling it is to serve and protect:

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the first responders. No clergy, as I can recall, even mentioned the potential devastation on those involved in the rescue efforts at the Pentagon.

Within a few months of that tragic day, however, these matters drew much closer to home. A dedicated student at the seminary started missing class. His pastor informed me that the young man, a police officer, was one of the first on the scene at the Pentagon. He also related images the officer had shared with him, those of burning flesh, dead bodies, and screaming and hysterical victims. Not only was this officer struggling with school but his marriage was in trouble, he was leaving his police department, and he had suicidal thoughts.

How did we fail to see this? While energetically teaching those charged with the spiritual care of others, we overlooked the spiritual devastation of one of our own within our very midst. It is not that we missed something we knew and understood. No, we did not recognize its reality and force altogether.

One reason stems from what blinds many people to the effects of policing on officers. *We do not have to deal with it.* That is, the public in general is largely unfamiliar with the horror and heartbreak that officers see every day. These dedicated guardians form a blue wall of separation from the corrupt and evil forces that pervade segments of society. Clergy may contend with many of these same forces from time to time, but officers must face them routinely. And, it is the constant presence of some of these forces that can prove so devastating.

A more insidious and, therefore, dangerous reason for this blindness involves the unreality with which many in law enforcement, as well as the general public, treat difficult matters relating to the profession. Others can outline the specific

ways in which these difficulties arise and manifest in the law enforcement community. My primary concern is with the apparent absence of the kinds of conceptual resources necessary to deal with the problems in this professional domain and how we in the clergy and the general population might understand them.

### A Meaningful Life

I always have had questions of ultimacy, about what is fundamentally important, rewarding, and good. It probably explains why I followed a career path in philosophy and ministry.

In both disciplines, people generally ask the big questions, those concerning God, truth, and happiness. My role as a theological educator and my own experience during 9/11, along with some recent research,<sup>1</sup> have convinced me that a place exists in the curriculum of seminaries and, I hope, in police academies to address these issues in relation to law enforcement. While those of us in seminary education seem to effectively prepare clergy

for parish ministry, we appear less able to equip them for public ministry. So, to effectively deal with the toxic effects of the policing environment on the law enforcement community, how should we proceed? To me, no serious engagement with the toxic by-products of policing on the vitality and wellness of law enforcement officers and other first responders is possible apart from a reassessment of the conceptual resources associated with the language of spirit.

What do I mean by the language of spirit? For me, the Australian philosopher Raimond Gaita ably brings out the ideological terrain that, although extremely important, is little discussed or considered. He argues that only human beings

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have souls, at least in the sense of a spiritual life. “An animal’s life does not have meaning because an animal cannot live its life deeply or shallowly, lucidly or opaquely, honestly or dishonestly, worthily or unworthily.”<sup>2</sup> Not for a moment is Gaita suggesting that the lives of animals are unimportant or meaningless, quite the contrary. He is pointing out that the lives of animals do not have the kind of interiority that we may attribute to human beings. And, it is precisely this interiority that constitutes a meaningful life.

Only human beings have souls, and we do not intend it as a disputable metaphysical proposition; the concept of a soul is a spiritual concept, and spiritual concepts apply only to what may have an inner life. Only human beings can reflect on what happens to them and take an attitude to what happens to them because of such reflection. An animal can suffer, but it cannot curse the day that it was born; an animal can be afraid, but it cannot be ashamed of its fear and despise itself; an animal can be happy, but it cannot be joyous; an animal cannot give of itself to certain pursuits and be admonished for doing so. The problems of life’s meaning cannot arise for an animal. Only a being for whom life can be problematic can have a spiritual life and, therefore, have a soul.<sup>3</sup>

Remorse, regret, despair, anguish, pity, joy, hope, and compassion represent the elements in what we understand as the spiritual landscape, the conceptual possibilities that have to do with human interiority. I contend that a failure to appreciate what Gaita has acknowledged—namely, that the spiritual life is constitutive of what it means to be a human being—substantially contributes to the detrimental effects of policing on law enforcement officers.

Numerous people in the United States regard themselves as religious. Many more, although not explicitly religious, consider themselves spiritual. And, by extension, this can be said of a number of law enforcement officers. In this article, I am not addressing the issue of religious faith or religious commitment. Rather, I am interested in the language of spirit and its place in meeting the challenges of vitality and wellness faced by those in law enforcement. Why have we forgotten these important facts about human beings and how they are constituted? And, most of all, what factors have led to this form of cultural and social blindness to our nature as human beings?

### A Disenchanted World

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor wonders about the radical decline of spiritual language in the West. “Why was it virtually impossible *not* to believe in God [for example] in say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000, many of us find this not only easy but inescapable?”<sup>4</sup>

Space does not allow an exploration of how this Copernican shift away from the pervasive presence of spirituality in every aspect of life morphs into the modern world. Suffice it to say that the disenchantment of which Taylor speaks—the secularization that characterizes our understanding of life, nature, and humanity—excludes perforce the spiritual realities that once were self-evident and pervasive.

For us, the cultural markers of a spiritually infused cosmos are now more like shadows, with no obvious reality.

But, one certain contributor to this disenchanted world we now live in is the tenacious hold evidentialism has exercised on our Western imagination. Evidentialism is the idea that to be rational, all true beliefs are subject to adjudication





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according to the strength of the evidence for or against. Within the modern practices of law enforcement, this cultural fact should come as no surprise. After all, is it not the point of collecting, analyzing, and evaluating evidence to ascertain the truth? What is not so widely appreciated is how evidentialism's hold on us has significantly contributed to the decline of spiritual concepts as a cultural norm.

One example is belief in God. Many people, including numerous philosophers, are inclined to assess the truth of the reality of God in evidentialist terms. They ask about the evidence for belief in God. To this requirement, both apologists and skeptics point to what they take as the putative evidence for and against God's reality (i.e., the existence of God). But, as the philosopher Gareth Moore has clearly pointed out, such assessments are not so reliable because traditional philosophers and theologians

give sentences about existence, for example, "God exists," a priority which does not belong to them. In reality, it is rare that we say of a chair that it exists or does not exist. We buy chairs, sit on them, tell people not to put their feet on them, and so on, and we do not assure ourselves of the existence of the chairs in question before doing so. This is not to say that we are not concerned with reality. We are, but that concern comes out above all in the way we act; and we act, with certainty, without prior theoretical justification. In the same way, we (some of us) pray to God, talk to others about God, try to do the will of God, maybe fear the judgment of God, and so on. This is a concern with reality which comes out in the way we act, though the acts concerned are of course different from the acts we perform in relation to chairs. Belief that

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God exists does not justify religious practice. Rather, to come to believe in God is to come to see the sense in religious practice. One does not, for instance, need to assure oneself of the existence of God before permitting oneself to give thanks; rather, it is in coming to see the sense in giving thanks that one comes to see the sense in believing in God.... The truth of "God exists" does not justify religious practice or underlie it; it is given sense and held in place by it.<sup>5</sup>

Here, Moore has in mind the spiritual practice of belief in God and how philosophers too often characterize such belief in evidentialist terms. But, a wider point exists in Moore's presentation that can prove instructive for us: the logical difference between our use of words like *chair*, *table*, or *cat* and our use of the word *God* and its relation to the language of spirit.

Whereas chairs, mountains, gazelles, and so on are material things, God is a spirit. Calling God a spirit is not to say that he is made of a different kind of substance from trees and trains. It is not, as it were, to make a remark about the physics of God...about the kind of sub-

stance of which God is made; it is a logical or grammatical marker, which marks the fact that our discourse about God functions in a very different way from our discourse about those things that we call material realities.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps, one way to make the kind of distinction that this discussion has suggested, thus far, is to say that God's reality is not a *physical* reality. God is a *spiritual* reality. And, it is only physical realities that are within evidentialism's purview.

### **A Spiritual Reality**

Many spiritual realities, of which God is clearly one, exist, such as the soul, justice and injustice, good and evil, judgment and forgiveness,

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remorse, guilt, despair, hope, and peace. These and many more mark the interiority that we call spirit or spirituality. While not a religious concept, it is the possibility of religion. Another spiritual reality is the idea of evil, a salient concept related to officer wellness and vitality. But, because evil is so often dismissed as an *unreality*, the exposure of law enforcement to its deleterious effects all too often is ignored.

The philosopher Raimond Gaita asks, “Does the concept of evil mark out a distinctive moral reality?”<sup>7</sup> As strange as it may seem, the source of Gaita’s puzzlement comes from “people [who] doubt that the concept of evil makes an interesting and distinctive contribution to our moral understanding.”<sup>8</sup> Gaita gives Inga Clendinnen as an example of the kind of moral skeptic he has in mind. In her book *Reading the Holocaust*, Clendinnen reveals that she “has no use for the concept of evil. With respect to evil, such skeptics are nominalists, believing that the concept of evil in so far as it refers to anything beyond itself marks only a deep moral sensibility.”<sup>9</sup> What then leads such moral skeptics to this conclusion? Gaita lists two. First, “there is the belief that the serious belief in evil requires metaphysical or religious support. Second, its use is often associated with the kind of moralizing we now call judgmentalism.”<sup>10</sup>

Against this disenchanted worldview, Gaita offers a compelling example of the nexus within which our understanding of the reality of evil has its sense. According to Gaita, the reality of evil is given in human reactions to human circumstances. Imagine, Gaita suggests, a man who experiences profound remorse. The example concerns a man who occasionally walks by an elderly drunk who, from time to time, asks for money, and, from time to time, the man gives him money. On one occasion, the elderly drunk accosts the man who, in an ensuing struggle, knocks him into the street where

he is killed. For many years, the man simply gave money to the elderly drunk and never had another thought about him or his circumstances. But, because of what has happened now, the man feels a deep, maybe even crushing, sense of remorse over what he has done. In this, Gaita recognizes what “makes us painfully aware of the reality of evil.”<sup>11</sup>

## Conclusion

Law enforcement officers face the reality of evil in Raimond Gaita’s sense all of the time. The indirect effects are on the interior lives of officers. To ignore these realities is to ignore the very lives of the men and women concerned and the meaningfulness of those lives. And, without a return to an awareness and appreciation of those spiritual realities in the lives of law enforcement officers and other first responders is to impoverish and endanger the very souls of these dedicated individuals who have willingly placed themselves in harm’s way to protect their fellow human beings. ♦



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Samuel L. Feemster, “Spirituality: The DNA of Law Enforcement Practice,” *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, November 2007,

8-17; and “Spirituality: An Invisible Weapon for Wounded Warriors,” *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, January 2009, 1-12.

<sup>2</sup> Raimond Gaita, *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception* (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, Ltd., 1991).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Gareth Moore, *Believing in God: A Philosophical Essay* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity: Thinking About Love and Truth and Justice*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Inga Clendinnen, *Reading the Holocaust* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> Gaita, *A Common Humanity*.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

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