Comments on Holmes

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ABSTRACT: Certain basic moral propositions are unlike basic religious propositions in that it is incoherent to deny them. A community needs a shared set of moral beliefs in a way that it does not need a shared set of religious beliefs. The cultivation of certain types of behaviour is necessary in a community. For these three reasons, bringing up children to adhere to certain basic moral principles is justified in a way that bringing them up to accept basic religious tenets is not.

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On first reading Holmes' comments on my paper (Barrow, 1993), I was not sure whether he was casting me as the "liberal, utilitarian" or the "conservative, communitarian" (Holmes, 1993, p. 234). This is not a facetious point, because actually I see myself as a (utilitarian) liberal, communitarian. What this juggling with labels signifies in a graphic way, I think, is that, at bottom, a problem for both of us (and I imagine many others) is the perennial and highly complex and serious problem of balancing the claims of individual freedom and the common good, including social cohesion.

The main point that Holmes focusses on is indeed a crucial one, and I acknowledge straightaway that it is not one for which I have a fully adequate answer. Essentially, he raises the question of what, if anything, the difference may be between basic religious postulates (which we both agree are non-falsifiable or non-provable) and basic social or moral postulates, which he rightly points out I treat as being different in kind. I believe that there are differences, but some of them are not strictly differences in logical or ontological status, and those that might be I find very difficult to articulate, as of course have many others before me.

Let me attempt to summarize three different kinds of reason that I have for arguing that they are different, and different in ways that are relevant to this issue.
1) While it would be absurd for me to maintain that basic moral principles such as those of justice or individual freedom are straightforward and provable, I think that there is a difference between, for example, the belief that impartiality is morally good and the belief that God exists. For the former surely could not sensibly be denied, although there may be all manner of disagreement as to what it means or calls for in practice. That is to say, while it may be conceded that on occasion one might argue that one ought to proceed partially (most likely because of the demands of some other conflicting moral principle in a particular situation), and that what constitutes partiality will sometimes vary with varying cultural contexts, the notion that it is as a matter of course quite morally acceptable to proceed in a manner that one recognizes as partial seems to be self-contradictory. This is not the place to go into precisely what kind of a claim this is (is it a matter of logic? of semantics?) nor to get involved with my own broader attempts to examine the question of what kind of a thing moral theory is, but it is perhaps worth adding that I have tried to defend the specific moral theory of utilitarianism on similar grounds (see Barrow, 1991): happiness, I maintain, is undeniably a good. To deny that is to misunderstand the concept of happiness, and, while building a whole moral theory on that is a questionable endeavour, it does nonetheless give us a firm basis from which to start. By contrast, a claim such as that God exists does not appear to have any such necessity about it (unless perhaps “God” were to be conceived of as no more than the figurative embodiment of precisely such self-evident moral propositions; but that is not the kind of conception, I take it, that we are here concerned with).

Thus, in an admittedly sketchy and inadequate way, I do here maintain that certain very basic and broad moral principles have a self-evidence or undeniability about them that basic broad religious claims do not.

2) I turn now to a quite different kind of argument. In order to survive, let alone in order to survive comfortably, we must have some common beliefs, assumptions, expectations, and norms of behaviour. As I understand it, Holmes and I are agreed on this point in a general way, but I would immediately add that I see no need for, and know of no persuasive argument for, concluding that such shared assumptions should include religious beliefs. We have to agree on issues such as private property and stealing to have a community at all; we do not have to agree on issues such as whether God exists. (I suppose that the communitarian in me would stress the need for such shared assumptions; the libertarian in me would like them to be as few as possible.)

Thus, my second point is that it may be justifiable to object to the inculcation of (unprovable) religious propositions and yet to accept the inculcation of certain broad moral principles, even if they were agreed to be unprovable (but see previous point), on the grounds that a community is inconceivable without the latter.

3) There is a very important distinction, which we have not highlighted so far,