Introduction

This book is a story. It’s a story about ordinary people in very different parts of the world dealing with rapid change in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It’s about times of turbulent and violent social upheaval and rupture with the past. It’s about modern times. It’s also about being human: what it is to be human in a modernising and globalising world; how, in responding to the circumstances of their times, different groups define, redefine, and attempt to put into practice their understandings of the good and of what constitutes a good life. And it’s about how human rights have come to be a key principle in those understandings and practices.

My approach to the story is an ethnographic one, examining different groups over the last three decades of the twentieth century and the first years of the twenty-first. My main focus is on three groups: Thai factory workers over a period of two coups in the 1970s; Spanish nuns in the 1980s, in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council and the end of the Franco dictatorship; Aboriginal people in the remote Pilbara region of Western Australia dealing with the impact of late colonialism and moves towards self-determination, from the 1980s to the present. Each of these groups has its own stories, illuminating ways in which, despite the assault of modernisation on deeply held traditional beliefs and practices, particular cultural understandings and practices continue to shape people’s responses to their novel circumstances.

At the same time, the stories throw light on the intimate connectedness between a good life and a good society. They demonstrate that modernity does not permit an unquestioning acceptance of ‘the way it has always been’, but demands an active response to the question of what constitutes a good society. In so doing, the stories make clear that there is not just one idea of the good or of a good society within any community. The concepts themselves and their appropriate practices are the subject of intense, often savage, conflict. At stake is a contested foundation on which each of the proponents bases their judgements of what is good, for themselves and for others. As modernisation fractures the familiarity of traditional ways, calling into often anxious question the continuities between the present and the past, so it also ruptures the possibility of a unitary moral source.

The people in these studies make choices that were not traditionally available. Some of those choices are willingly embraced; others are forced on them by circumstances. Some are an invocation of past certainties, where the moral source was external and based in a religious interpretation of the world. Others reflect the shift to a secular, humanist understanding wrought by modernity. For the people in these studies, the distinction between the religious and the secular
humanist conceptions of the world is not, as is generally proposed, a stark opposition. Rather, their moral framework is distilled, more or less consciously and deliberately, from their experiences of the past and the present in ways that accommodate both.

The direction mapped out in very different ways by the different groups suggests that one of the key possibilities offered by modernity is not necessarily, despite ongoing tensions, the displacement of a religious view of the world by a secular, humanist understanding, but rather the possibility of forging links between the two. The studies show that the vehicle that offers a dynamic relationship between them is the principle of human rights.

Emerging in the shadow of two world wars, the articulation of human rights marks a critical shift in the twentieth century from the earlier modern concept of natural rights and the Rights of Man as citizen, to civil rights, also as citizen, and then to rights based in the fact of being human and pertaining to all humans. In this book, I trace these shifts over time and place: in the faltering development of labour rights in Thailand in the brief democratic period between 1973 and 1976; in the ways in which the nuns in Spain, after the Second Vatican Council, moved from their cloistered separation from the world to being in a world where they saw the fight for human rights and social justice as an essential part of their vocation and Christian commitment; in the impact for Pilbara Aboriginal people of the expanding application of human rights, from their struggle to protect cultural heritage and identity to the legal and political recognition of their native title rights. In all three instances, the invocation of human rights is connected to, even pivotal for, and certainly not in opposition to, the group's religious beliefs.

This ethnographic insight offers a compellingly different view of how people can live in the modern world, not as a clash of civilisations, in conflict over religious differences or over religious and humanist oppositions. Rather, these studies show people drawing on a variety of sources, both religious and secular, in transforming their moral frameworks in order to live a good life in the modern world.

At the same time, the stories also show how deeply divided communities can become when the adaptation of their moral source compromises or denies the universal application of human rights; where evil—itself a moral choice—is chosen; where the urge to power privileges one interpretation of the good and the good society over others; where that interpretation is made singular and dominant. This is the true divide: not necessarily between religious and secular moralities, but between fundamentalist certainties, whether religious or secular, and humanist moralities. The studies indicate that the Buddhism of the Thai factory workers, the Christianity of the Spanish nuns, the creation and Christian
beliefs of Pilbara Aboriginal people can all be fundamentalist, professing as absolute their versions of the truth. They can also all be profoundly humanistic. The recognition and acceptance of the role of human rights, through the experience of modernity, have come to play a central part in making the distinction.

Modernity has challenged the role of religion as arbiter of truth to being one of framing moral choices with reference to humanity. In so doing, it has universalised the notion of the good by drawing it into the discourse of human rights. The principal vehicle for developing a formal discourse has been the United Nations. At the same time, the story demonstrates that the notion of human rights itself is always in a process of becoming, always in need of further reflection, differentiation, negotiation. The idea of human rights can fail with the failure of moral imagination.¹ It can also fail when national and international institutions neglect to entrench adequate human rights standards and practices, or renege on their universal application in the name of national interest, security, or a ‘war on terror’. The history of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries—an age that ‘has witnessed more violations of their principles than any of the less “enlightened” epochs’²—is as much about the flight from human rights as it is about their implementation.

The studies show that the acceptance of human rights can never be taken for granted, that their practical meaning is itself contested when captured by sectional interests—whether national, ideological or religious—or subjected to a struggle for power. The dialectic between human rights implementation and its distortion or rejection is present in Thailand, in Spain, and in Australia. It was also present in the United Nations World Conference against Racism in Durban in 2001, and in the Non-Government Organisations (NGO) Forum that preceded the Conference. In Durban, both national governments and NGOs, on the basis of bitterly different interpretations of human rights, challenged the international standards agreed to in and since the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.³

The Conference demonstrated that the notion of the universal is itself contingent, subject to historical and social conditions and to cultural meanings. Nevertheless, despite its faltering, and the attempts to impose the simplicity of binary oppositions rather than to work towards the complexity of consensus, the Durban World Conference maintained the universality and indivisibility of human rights principles as the basis for the idea of the good and of the good society. Durban also provided a strong signal that understandings based on

---

¹ Grayling (2003: 166).
² Douzinas (2000: 2).
human rights principles of the good, of a good life, and of a good society, do not come at the cost of diversity. It reaffirmed, often uncomfortably, that a moral order centred on human rights is not abstract or ideal, but relational; that it demands dialogue and openness to the other; that the negotiation of tensions in those relationships is never binary and never total but interdependent, contradictory, ambivalent: ‘making possible and making trouble, both at once’.⁴

In the story that I set out to tell in this book, Durban provides both a climax and a denouement. The story is one of how human rights provides pathways for each of the groups included in this study to engage in their own culturally shaped dialogue with modernity. It is also my story. I encountered these groups as an anthropologist, examining the content and context of people’s everyday lives. But I also encountered them, to some extent accidentally, as a result of life choices that involved family and a husband’s career, and participation in human rights advocacy, as much as my own academic interests.

Like the people in these stories, I am also a product of modernity, someone who has moved from finding my moral source in a traditional religious interpretation of the world to finding it in a secular humanist one. My experience of this personal transformation, and my own human rights journey, provides its own thread, linking these apparently diverse stories; it constitutes the background to an understanding that a religious interpretation of the world does not have to be either anti-secular or anti-humanist. For me, as for the nuns in Spain, a pivotal experience was that of the Second Vatican Council and the opening of the Roman Catholic Church to the world and to those previously defined—and officially condemned over centuries—as Other. The radical nature of this shift was embodied for me in a moment when the then pope, John XXIII—Angelo Giuseppe (Joseph) Roncalli—came down from the papal throne to greet a Jewish delegation during the Vatican Council and embraced them, saying, ‘I am Joseph, your brother’.⁵ In that moment, and throughout Vatican II, the Roman Church placed humanity at its centre and challenged the authoritarian and hierarchical moral framework that had been its hallmark since the Reformation. As the story demonstrates and the nuns experienced, that shift was too radical to be sustained, as were the Thai ‘democratic experiment’ and moves by Aboriginal people to true self-determination. Nevertheless, the axis of tradition wobbled, and human rights principles have maintained it with some, if not all, of that tilt.

The structure of this story, then, is personal as well as conceptual; if, indeed, those two things are different. They are combined, at least, in my decision to situate my analysis within an enlightenment tradition, necessarily modified but not invalidated by more recent critiques. Anthropology over the period

---

⁵ Genesis 45: 3–4.
covered by this book—that is, over the past 30 years—has gone from the self-assurance of structuralist-functionalist or Marxist theory through the self-doubt and often navel-gazing of reflexivity. I have gone some way with it, though I parted theoretical company in its period of postmodernism and cultural relativism. Along the way, the discipline has, quite properly, further dethroned the anthropologist as the authoritative voice speaking for others; it has responded—sometimes cleverly, sometimes not—to the challenges of new approaches brought by feminist, subaltern, post-colonial, critical and other perspectives and by the increasingly active involvement of anthropological subjects in speaking for themselves. Despite the upheavals, ethnography—analysis based on the intimate observation of and participation in the daily lives of a particular group of people—has remained the heart of the discipline.

It is through the ethnographies presented in this book, and through the multiplicity of voices and experiences, that I examine how those people who are its subjects have responded to the questions: what does it mean to have a good life? What does it mean to be good and to do good? What kind of society do I want in order to have a good life? Each group, as it has been caught up in the sweeping structural changes wrought by modernisation, has crafted its own answers. No one set of answers is complete, and the story suggests that, in the sequel, people will continue to confront moral choices that either centre or marginalise human rights. Their experience of a good life, and a good society, will depend on those choices.