



The New Commandments

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What do we say when we want to revisit a long-standing policy or scheme that no longer seems to be serving us or has ceased to produce useful results? We begin by saying tentatively, “Well, it’s not exactly written in stone.” (Sometimes this comes out as “not set in stone.”)

By that, people mean that it’s not one of the immutable Tablets of the Law. Thus, more recent fetishes such as the gold standard, or the supposedly holy laws of the free market, can be discarded as not being incised on granite or marble. But what if it is the original stone version that badly needs a re-write? Who will take up the revisionist chisel?

There is in fact a good biblical precedent for doing just that, since the giving of the divine Law by Moses appears in three or four wildly different scriptural versions. (When you hear people demanding that the Ten Commandments be displayed in courtrooms and schoolrooms, always be sure to ask which set. It works every time.) The first and most famous set comes in Exodus 20 but ends with Moses himself smashing the supposedly most sacred artifacts ever known to man: the original, God-dictated panels of Holy Writ. The second edition occurs in Exodus 34, where new but completely different tablets are presented after some heavenly re-write session and are for the first time called “the ten commandments.” In the fifth chapter of Deuteronomy, Moses once more calls his audience together and recites the original Sinai speech with one highly significant alteration (the Sabbath commandment’s justifications in each differ greatly). But plainly discontented with the effect of this, he musters the flock again twenty-two chapters further on, as the river Jordan is coming into view, and gives an additional set of orders—chiefly terse curses—which are also to be inscribed in stone. As with the gold plates on which Joseph Smith found the Book of Mormon in upstate New York, no trace of any of these original yet conflicting tablets survives.

Thus we are fully entitled to consider them as a work in progress. May there not be some old commandments that could

be retired, as well as some new ones that might be adopted? Taking the most celebrated Top 10 in order, we find (I am using the King James, or “Authorized,” version of the text):

I and II

These commandments are in fact a mixture of related injunctions. *I am the LORD thy God.... Thou shalt have no other gods before me.* This use of capitalization and upper- and lowercase carries the intriguing implication that there perhaps are some other gods but not equally deserving of respect or awe. (Scholars differ about the epoch during which the Jewish people decided on monotheism.) Then comes the prohibition of “graven images” or indeed “any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.” This appears to forbid representational art, just as some Muslims interpret the Koran to forbid the depiction of any human form, let alone any sacred one. (It certainly seems to discourage Christian iconography, with its crucifixes, and statues of virgins and saints.) But the ban is obviously intended as a very emphatic one, since it comes with a reminder that I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation. The collective punishment of future children, for the sin of *lèse-majesté*, may not strike everyone as an especially moral promise.

III

Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain. A slightly querulous and repetitive note is struck here, as if of injured vanity. Nobody knows how to obey this commandment, or how to avoid blasphemy or profanity. For example, I say “God alone knows” when I sincerely intend to say “Nobody knows.” Is this ontologically dangerous? Ought not unalterable laws to be plain and unambiguous?

IV

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. This ostensibly brief commandment goes on for a long time—for four verses in fact—and stresses the importance of a day dedicated to the LORD, during which neither one’s children nor one’s servants or animals should be allowed to perform any tasks. (Query: Why is it specifically addressed to people who are assumed to have staff?)

Nobody is opposed to a day of rest. The international Communist movement got its start by proclaiming a strike for an eight-hour day on May 1, 1886, against Christian employers who used child labor seven days a week. But in Exodus 20:8-11, the reason given for the day off is that “in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day.” Yet in Deuteronomy 5:15 a different reason for the Sabbath observance is offered: “Remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt, and that the LORD thy God brought thee out thence through a mighty hand and by a stretched out arm: therefore the LORD thy God commanded thee to keep the sabbath day.” Preferable though this may be, with its reminder of previous servitude, we again find mixed signals here. Why can’t rest be recommended for its own sake? Also, why can’t the infallible and omniscient and omnipotent one make up his mind

what the real reason is?

V

Honor thy father and thy mother. Innocuous as this may seem, it is the only commandment that comes with an inducement instead of an implied threat. Both the Exodus and Deuteronomy versions urge it for the same reason: “that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.” This perhaps has the slight suggestion of being respectful to Father and Mother in order to come into an inheritance—the Israelites have already been promised the Canaanite territory that is currently occupied by other people, so the prospective legacy pickings are rather rich. Again, why not propose filial piety as a nice thing in itself?

VI

Thou shalt not kill. This very celebrated commandment quite obviously cannot mean what it seems to say in English translation. In the original Hebrew it comes across as something more equivalent to “Thou shalt do no murder.” We can be fairly sure that the “original intent” is not in any way pacifistic, because immediately after he breaks the original tablets in a fit of rage, Moses summons his Levite faction and says (Exodus 32:27-28):

Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, put every man his sword by his side, and go in and out from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbor. And the children of Levi did according to the word of Moses: and there fell of the people that day about three thousand men.

With its seven-word preface, that order, too, obviously constituted a “commandment” of some sort. The whole book of Exodus is a commandment-rich environment, littered with other fierce orders to slay people for numberless minor offenses (including violations of the Sabbath) and also includes the sinister, ominous verse “Thou shalt not suffer [permit] a witch to live,” which was taken as a divine instruction by Christians until relatively recently in human history. Some work is obviously needed here: What is first-degree or third-degree killing and what isn’t? Distinguishing killing from murder is not a job easily left to mortals: What are we to do if God himself can’t tell the difference?

VII

Thou shalt not commit adultery. For some reason, “the seventh” is the only one of the commandments that is still widely known by its actual number. Extramarital carnal knowledge was probably more of a threat to society when families and tribes were closer-knit, and more bound by stern codes of honor. Having provided the raw material for most of the plays and novels ever published in non-Middle Eastern languages, adultery continues to be a great source of misery and joy and fascination. Most criminal codes have long given up the attempt to make it a punishable offense in law: Its rewards and punishments are carefully administered by its practitioners and victims. It perhaps does not deserve to be classed with murder or theft or perjury, which brings us to:

VIII

Thou shalt not steal. Not much to query here. Those who

have worked hard to acquire a bit of property are entitled to resent those who would rather steal than work, and when society evolves to the point where there is wealth that belongs to nobody—public or social property—those who plunder it for private gain are rightly regarded with hatred and contempt. Admittedly, the prosperity of some families and some states is also founded on original theft, but in that case the same principle of disapproval can apply.

IX

Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor. This is possibly the most sophisticated ruling in the whole Decalogue. Human society is inconceivable unless words are to some extent bonds, and in legal disputes we righteously demand the swearing of oaths that entail severe penalties for perjury. Until recently, much testimony before Congress was taken without witnesses being “sworn”: This allowed a great deal of official lying. Nothing focuses the attention more than a reminder that one is speaking on oath. The word “witness” expresses one of our noblest concepts. “Bearing witness” is a high moral responsibility.

Note, also, how relatively flexible this commandment is. Its fulcrum is the word “against.” If you are quite sure of somebody’s innocence and you shade the truth a little in the witness-box, you are no doubt technically guilty of perjury and may be privately troubled. But if you consciously lie in order to indict someone who is not guilty, you have done something irretrievably foul.

X

Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbor’s. There are several details that make this perhaps the most questionable of the commandments. Leaving aside the many jokes about whether or not it’s okay or kosher to covet thy neighbor’s wife’s ass, you are bound to notice once again that, like the Sabbath order, it’s addressed to the servant-owning and property-owning class. Moreover, it lumps the wife in with the rest of the chattel (and in that epoch could have been rendered as “thy neighbor’s wives,” to boot).

Notice also that no specific act is being pronounced as either compulsory (the Sabbath) or forbidden (perjury). Instead, this is the first but not the last introduction in the Bible of the totalitarian concept of “thought crime.” You are being told, in effect, not even to think about it. (Jesus of Nazareth in the New Testament takes this a step further, announcing that those with lust in their heart have already committed the sin of adultery. In that case, you might as well be hung—or stoned—for a sheep as for a lamb, or for an ox or an ass if it cometh to that.) Wise lawmakers know that it is a mistake to promulgate legislation that is impossible to obey.

There are further objections to be made. From the “left” point of view, how is it moral to prohibit people from regarding the gains of the rich as ill-gotten, or from demanding a fairer distribution of wealth? From the “right” point of view, why is it wicked to be ambitious and acquisitive? And is not envy a great spur to emulation and competition? I once had a debate on these points with Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of that consoling text *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, and he told me that

there is a scholarly Talmudic argument, or midrash, maintaining that “neighbor” in this context really does mean immediate next-door neighbor. For that matter, there is persuasive textual argument that “neighbor” in much of the Bible means only “fellow Jew.” But it seems rather a waste of a commandment to confine it to either the Joneses or the Semites.

What emerges from the first review is this: The Ten Commandments were derived from situational ethics. They show every symptom of having been man-made and improvised under pressure. They are addressed to a nomadic tribe whose main economy is primitive agriculture and whose wealth is sometimes counted in people as well as animals. They are also addressed to a group that has been promised the land and flocks of other people: the Amalekites and Midianites and others whom God orders them to kill, rape, enslave, or exterminate. And this, too, is important because at every step of their arduous journey the Israelites are reminded to keep to the laws, not because they are right but just because they will lead them to become conquerors (of, as it happens, almost the only part of the Middle East that has no oil).

So, then: how to prune and how to amend? Numbers One through Three can simply go, since they have nothing to do with morality and are no more than a long, rasping throat clearing by an admittedly touchy dictator. Mere fear of unseen authority is not a sound basis for ethics. The associated ban on sculpture and pictorial art should also be lifted. Number Four can possibly stay, though rest periods are not exactly an ethical imperative and are mandated by practicality as much as by heaven. At least, if shorn of its first and third and fourth redundant verses (none of which can possibly apply to non-Jews), Number Four does imply that there are rights as well as duties. For millions of people for thousands of years, the Sabbath was made a dreary burden of obligation and strict observance instead of a day of leisure or recreation. It also led to absurd hypocrisies that seem to treat God as a fool: He won’t notice if we make the elevators stop on every floor so that no pious Jew needs to press a button. This is unwholesome and over-strenuous.

As for Number Five, by all means respect for the elders, but why is there nothing to forbid child abuse? (Insolence on the part of children is punishable by death, according to Leviticus 20:9, only a few verses before the stipulation of the death penalty for male homosexuals.) A cruel or rude child is a ghastly thing, but a cruel or brutal parent can do infinitely more harm. Yet even in a long and exhaustive list of prohibitions, parental sadism or neglect is never once condemned. Memo to Sinai: Rectify this omission.

Number Six: Note that mere human systems have done better subsequently in distinguishing different moral scales of homicide. Memo to Sinai: Are you morally absolute or aren’t you? If so, what about the poor massacred Midianites?

Number Seven: Fair enough if you must, but is polygamy adultery? Also, could not permanent monogamy have been made slightly more consonant with human nature? Why create people with lust in their hearts? Then again, what about rape? It seems to be very strongly recommended, along with genocide, slavery, and infanticide, in Numbers 31:1-18, and surely constitutes a rather extreme version of sex outside marriage.

Numbers Eight and Nine: Admirable. Also brief and to the

point, with one rather useful nuance in the keyword “against.”

Number Ten: Does wrong to women by making them property and also necessitates continual celestial wiretapping of private thoughts. Sinister and despotic in that it cannot be obeyed and thus makes sinners even of quite thoughtful people.

I am trying my best not to view things through a smug later prism. Only the Almighty can scan matters sub specie aeternitatis: from the viewpoint of eternity. One must also avoid cultural and historical relativism: There’s no point in retroactively ordering the Children of Israel to develop a germ theory of disease (so as to avoid mistaking plagues for divine punishments) or to understand astronomy (so as not to make foolish predictions and boasts based on the planets and stars). Still, if we think of the evils that afflict humanity today and that are man-made and not inflicted by nature, we would be morally numb if we did not feel strongly about genocide, slavery, rape, child abuse, sexual repression, white-collar crime, the wanton destruction of the natural world, and people who yak on cell phones in restaurants. (Also, people who commit simultaneous suicide and murder while screaming “God is great”: Is that taking the Lord’s name in vain or is it not?)

It’s difficult to take oneself with sufficient seriousness to begin any sentence with the words “Thou shalt not.” But who cannot summon the confidence to say: Do not condemn people on the basis of their ethnicity or color. Do not ever use people as private property. Despise those who use violence or the threat of it in sexual relations. Hide your face and weep if you dare to harm a child. Do not condemn people for their inborn nature—why would God create so many homosexuals only in order to torture and destroy them? Be aware that you too are an animal and dependent on the web of nature, and think and act accordingly. Do not imagine that you can escape judgment if you rob people with a false prospectus rather than with a knife. Turn off that fucking cell phone—you have no idea how unimportant your call is to us. Denounce all jihad-ists and crusaders for what they are: psychopathic criminals with ugly delusions. Be willing to renounce any god or any religion if any holy commandments should contradict any of the above. In short: Do not swallow your moral code in tablet form.

Taken from *Arguably* by Christopher Hitchens.