

BEING GOOD WITHOUT GOD
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University Congregational Church
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Reading: Luke 6: 31 (NRSV)

Do to others as you would have them do to you.

Several months ago I received a letter that was supposedly written to “Dr. Laura.” Simon Blackburn calls Dr. Laura the “fundamentalist agony aunt.” He also had seen the letter, and this is his version.

Dear Dr. Laura,

Thank you for doing so much to educate people regarding God’s Law. I have learned a great deal from you, and I try to share that knowledge with as many people as I can. When someone tries to defend the homosexual lifestyle, for example, I simply remind him that Leviticus 12:22 clearly states it to be an abomination. End of debate. I do need some advice from you, however, regarding some of the specific laws and how to best follow them.

a. When I burn a bull on the altar as a sacrifice, I know it creates a pleasing odor for the Lord. (Lev. 1:9) The problem is my neighbors. They claim the odor is not pleasing to them. How should I deal with this?

- b. *I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as it suggests in Exodus 21:7. In this day and age, what do you think would be a fair price to ask for her?*
- c. *I know that I am allowed no contact with a woman while she is in her period of menstrual uncleanness (Lev. 15:19-24). The problem is, how do I tell? I have tried asking, but most women take offense.*
- d. *Leviticus 25:44 states that I may buy slaves from the nations that are around us. A friend of mine claims that this applies to Mexicans, but not Canadians. Can you clarify?*
- e. *I have a neighbor who insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly states that he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself?*
- f. *A friend of mine feels that even though eating shellfish is an abomination (Lev. 10:10), it is a lesser abomination than homosexuality. I don't agree. Can you settle this?*
- g. *Leviticus 21:20 states that I may not approach the altar of God if I have a defect in my sight. I have to admit that I wear reading glasses. Does my vision have to be 20/20, or is there some wiggle room here?*

I know you have studied these things extensively, so I am confident you can help. Thank you again for reminding us that God's word is eternal and unchanging.¹

I am certain that all of us have known people like the writer who assume that the Bible is the inerrant and infallible word of God. As such, the revelation of God is sealed in the Bible, which is their authoritative source of moral conduct. They are never able to resolve the contradictions of the Bible, or integrate the moral standards and norms of particular Biblical cultures with modern times. My friend, Dr. Brandon Scott, likes to ask fundamentalists if they have taken all that they own, sold it, and given it to the poor. Jesus is quite clear about this necessity of discipleship if you read Luke 18: 22 literally.

Now I am not going to suggest that we could understand Western moral philosophy and jurisprudence without understanding the foundations of the Bible. At the same time, we must all admit that the Bible, the teachings of the church, and our various doctrines of God often complicate our understanding of personal and corporate ethics. High crimes and misdemeanors have often been committed by men and women who thought they were doing God's will. The church has often been the source of treachery and murder, such as

¹ Simon Blackburn, *Being Good* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 11-12.

the burning, drowning, or hanging of so-called witches in Europe and New England. And too often and too long, the church was a coconspirator in the atrocities of anti-Semitism, the abuse and oppression of women and children, and slavery.

Every human being knows what it means to compromise one's faith and values. Belief in God, membership in a church, or ordination in ministry are not prophylactics against immorality. What is more, belief in God often creates conflict of values and leaves faith communities paralyzed to act in socially responsible ways. I remember several years ago Sister Helen Prejean was scheduled to visit Tulsa, Oklahoma. You may recall that she wrote the book, *Dead Man Walking*, and is an opponent of the death penalty. The Tulsa Metropolitan Ministry was asked to support Sister Prejean's visit. I endorsed the idea but was told that TMM could not support her visit. Later I raised the question of racism and the death penalty. I was told that we could not even have the conversation. Why? Because the Muslim members believed that the *Koran* was clear about the justification of the death penalty and such a conversation would alienate them. The shadow of disappointment spread across the faces of my African American colleagues. The interfaith movement of Tulsa

was debilitated to think and act on a grave social injustice because of their conflicting views of God and scripture. Or to rephrase it, God was in the way of social moral discourse.

As the world writhes under the threat of terrorism, we cannot help but wonder about its relationship with theology. Muslim extremists place bombs in wedding halls, pizza parlors, and buses in the name of Allah, who all Muslims describe as merciful and beneficent. And I am sure there is some cracker out there who is shooting windows out of mosques or burning Muslim businesses in the precious name of Jesus. Extremist pro-lifers are shooting doctors and bombing clinics in the name of God. It's enough to make a deity sick to her stomach.

My purpose this morning is not to discredit or disparage the place of religion in our democracy. But I have concluded that it is more problematic than it is helpful. And given the great diversity of religious faiths and practices I think religious leaders should reaffirm the boundaries between private faith and public virtue.

Now I am not suggesting that people should violate their values, even their religious values, in terms of public issues and policies. I affirm the importance of individual conscience. It has often been the

case that democracy is strengthened by those lone prophetic voices who offer a higher value of moral probity than is the common norm. But democracy is violated, and her people are violated, when our private faith becomes obligatory for the general public. Take, for example the placing of the Ten Commandments in courthouses. We could easily make the case that the Ten Commandments have had a profound influence on our basic understanding of morality and common law. As valuable as the Commandments are to our culture, however, they are an expression of a particular religious faith. Jews and Christians declare those words to be from the mouth of God. Exodus 20 claims, “And God spoke all of these words...” The imposition of the Ten Commandments on a democracy is more than the imposition of rules, laws, or virtues. It is an imposition of religious affirmations about the source of those commandments.

An egregious example of this issue is the statements made by U.S. Representative Katherine Harris from the state of Florida. She was seeking election to the U.S. Senate. The Associated Press reports an interview she held with the *Florida Baptist Witness*. Ms. Harris declared that the separation of church and state is “a lie we have been told,” and that separating religion and politics is “wrong because God

is the one who chooses our rulers.” She further declared that the founding fathers and God did not intend the nation to be “a nation of secular laws.” Further, she stated, “If you’re not electing Christians, then in essence you’re going to legislate sin,” such as abortion and gay marriage.²

Now mark my words. This kind of religious-political ideology is every bit the threat to American democracy as is Islamic fundamentalism.

May I suggest that Ms. Harris go back to school and learn the basics of American democracy? She ought to read John Locke and Thomas Jefferson where she will discover the important work they did to shift the power of government from the “divine right of kings” to the divine right of citizens. Indeed, the citizen’s elect the government. And every student who studied American history and politics knows that this nation is founded on the rule of law. Read the Constitution, Ms. Harris! Read Mr. Jefferson’s “Act for Establishing Religious Freedom.” You will be pleased to know that Ms. Harris lost that election.

The Code of Hammurabi is also important to the development of Western civilization. It contains 282 case laws including economic

² The Associated Press, reported in *The Blade*, August 27, 2006, p.3

provision for prices, tariffs, trade, and commerce; family law for marriage and divorce; criminal law for assault and theft; and civil law covering slavery and debt. The Code of Hammurabi is ascribed to the Babylonian god, Marduk. Likewise, there are many moral values and rules for conduct in the Eightfold path of Buddha, including murder, stealing, and sexual misconduct. I have yet to see the Code of Hammurabi or the Buddha's Eightfold Path etched in marble, gracing the foyer of a county courthouse. Furthermore, I would argue that Magna Charta is equally important to the establishment of American law and democracy as the Ten Commandments, and more worthy of engraving.

The problem with the Ten Commandments, or the imposition of any other religious document on public law, is that the impetus is moved from law to lawgiver. When Jews, Christians, Muslims, Native Americans, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains, humanists, agnostics, and atheists come together to form a community, adopt a form of government and laws for their common life they will never agree on who is the lawgiver. They will have differing and conflicting views about the Source of life and law. Our focus cannot be theological or metaphysical. Our focus must be on our relationships with one

another. We may worship God, Jesus, Allah, Yahweh, or Brahman in our houses of worship. But when we enter the public square all talk about the Sacred One must be replaced with talk about our shared responsibilities to each other in community. To put it simply, democracy demands that we learn to be good without God.

Now without a doubt, there are many shared values in all of the religious and non-religious traditions we could think of. Among these would be the sanctity of life, respect for and protection of property, stewardship of the earth and her resources, and the civil rights that justice demands of human communities. But when we gather together to shape a union and the laws of our common life, our allegiance is not to god or goddess, but to just and equitable relationships. Our orientation is not to heaven, but to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” If a Christian thinks that America’s purpose is to “stand up, stand up for Jesus,” that Christian does not understand democracy. If a Muslim thinks that Sharia, strict Islamic law, should govern the United States that Muslim does not understand democracy. Both extremes are dangerous to the very democracy that gives space for all religious people to worship freely. Both are charged with the responsibility of achieving social justice

and civil rights for all. These should be the animating principles of the nation's soul.³

The Church Triumphant will never serve democracy well. And I do not think it will serve the church well either. As far as the common life of human communities is concerned, I believe we ought to place the United Nations Declaration of Human rights above the Apostle's Creed, the Constitution of the United States above the Articles of Faith, and the Declaration of Independence above all religious creeds and covenants. I believe that serving the needs of others is a far greater mission for the church than imposing her will and ideology on the state.

Matthew's gospel reports in the 25th chapter that the real disciple of Jesus is the one who feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, quenches the drought of the thirsty, and comforts the imprisoned and sick. I believe the time has come for Christians to fulfill that vision, not because Jesus said it, but because it is the humane thing to do. Buddha calls upon his disciples to relieve the suffering of all creatures of life. I believe the time has come for Buddhists to relieve such suffering, not because Buddha said it but because it is the decent thing to do. At University Congregational Church we gather to do the

³ Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1997), p. 19.

work of justice, peace, and brotherhood. I believe we ought to do it, not because our covenant says so but because every human being can only thrive in justice, peace, freedom, and community.

Gods and goddesses, theology and creed only come after the actions of human goodness. And if they get in the way of being good we must shed them and look deeper into the true motives of our actions. Democritus said it so simply, "Word is a shadow of deed." If, on the other hand, religious principles and faith promote genuine goodness we may embrace them. But never will they substitute for compassion and justice. Indeed, I submit that perhaps our religious principles are better served when we drop all religious titles and deities and do the right thing for its own sake. We can be good without God. And if you believe in God, we best serve God by being good to one another.

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