

Commandments

by Herb Silverman

Jesus allegedly said in Mark 12:29-31:

*“The first of all commandments is to love thy God,
and the second is to love thy neighbor as thyself.
No commandments are greater than these.”*

I think the second of these commandments is an excellent one and should be the foundation of our morality. We need to distinguish between crimes against humanity and crimes against “God.” Murder is a crime against humanity and universally condemned by everyone, regardless of religious belief. On the other hand, some religious believers commit crimes against humanity by following the first commandment when their “holy” book tells them to do so. Some will argue that the Crusades represented misguided Christianity and that true Christians would never do such a thing. However, at the time, it was easy for Christians to justify Crusades with their holy book. It’s terrifying to see how much evil can be justified in the name of God’s teaching in holy books. Bottom line: Commandment two is excellent, Commandment one sucks.

When it comes to commandments, the Hebrew Bible has 613 of them. More about that later. The most popular commandments, found in Exodus 20, are the familiar ten promoted by the mythical Moses and by **Cecil B. DeMille’s** movie *The Ten Commandments*.

The first commandment, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me,” conflicts with the First Amendment to our United States Constitution guaranteeing freedom of religion — the right to worship one, several, or no gods.

The next three commandments (no graven images, not taking God’s name in vain, keeping the Sabbath day holy) refer to specific kinds of worship directed toward a God who punishes children even “unto the third and fourth generation” because their fathers could not believe. These first four commandments are religious edicts that have nothing to do with ethical behavior. They describe how to worship and pay homage to a jealous and vindictive God.

The fifth commandment, about honoring parents, should not be so unconditional as to condone abusive parenting. Unfortunately, there is no commandment about parents honoring their children or treating them humanely.

The next four (proscriptions against murder, adultery, stealing and lying) obviously have merit, and existed in cultures long before Moses. Yet even these are open to interpretation. Is abortion murder? What about euthanasia? War? Capital punishment? Reasonable people can disagree and respect other opinions, unless convinced they are acting as God’s messenger.

The tenth commandment, “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s house, wife, slaves, ox, donkey, or any other property,” condones slavery and treats women as property. And, by the way, the American system of merchandising is based on coveting our neighbor’s possessions.

The biblical penalty for violating most of the religious commandments is death.

These Ten Commandments, meant to be the cornerstone of an ethical and moral life, are notable for what they omit. Instead of condemning covetousness and threatening to

punish children if their parents do not worship in the correct way, why not condemn slavery, racism, sexual assault, child and spousal abuse, and torture?

While these are the best known of the 613 commandments in the Hebrew Bible, an angry Moses smashed them according to Exodus 32:19.

Religions don’t promote the anachronistic replacements found in Exodus 34, which is the only place (Exodus 34:28) that the Hebrew Bible actually refers to the Ten Commandments. Its sage advice includes: “Thou shalt not offer the blood of my sacrifice with leaven, the firstborn of a donkey shalt thou redeem with a lamb, the sacrifice of the festival of the Passover shall not be left until the morning, and (my personal favorite) Thou shalt not boil a kid (a goat) in its mother’s milk.”

However puzzling these commandments in Exodus 34 may seem, I think we can all recognize that it is better to refrain from boiling a kid in its mother’s milk than to justify owning slaves or treating women as property (Exodus 20).

I think most atheists and secular humanists agree with what is referred to as Jesus’s second commandment: “Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself.” However, I seem to spend most of my secular writing time critiquing religious doctrine. It sounds like my goal is to Invalidate Thy Neighbor’s Belief in God. While I admit I enjoy doing this, it is often counter-productive. To love our (religious) neighbor, we need to learn better how to empathize with him or her.

Religion is no longer as important to many people as it used to be. Does this mean nonbelievers are winning? Yes, to some extent, but we often wonder how religionists can be so wrong in their theology yet remain part of their religious flock.

What appeals to a lot of religious folks is not theological beliefs but feelings of social connectedness. People don’t necessarily go to houses of worship to worship, but to connect with friends, plan outings, and create business opportunities. Whether religious or not, we all need social connections. Fortunately, many secular humanist organizations have formed to fulfill this need, but we are not as well known or as effective as our religious counterparts. We need to continue to grow.

I think to attract religious people to our causes, and change stereotypes, we should put more emphasis on what we do and what we believe rather than harping endlessly on what we don’t believe. We might try to point out the good works we do as individuals or as part of community organizations.

Religious believers may never give up their religion, but perhaps some of them will better understand and respect what we do. Rather than showing religious people the obvious flaws in their “holy” books, we might be more productive working together with our progressive religious neighbors on causes we have in common. And we may learn a lot from them, too.

About the author:

Herb Silverman is a regular contributor to *The Freethought Society News*. His past submissions, bio, and contact information can be found at the below link to The Freethought Society website page:

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