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Searching for our moral roots

JOHN HABGOOD

It is a coincidence that our lessons this evening should have included the Ten Commandments.^{1,2} They were simply the set lessons for today's evensong. But it is a good coincidence because the commandments remind us of our moral roots. They are a foundation stone of Jewish and Christian civilisation. For thousands of years they have been regarded as the very heart of biblical morality. And so for a profession which often finds itself at the sharp end of our society's moral dilemmas the message that morality has a firm basis in God's commandments could be both encouraging and important.

The doctors among you do not need me to remind you of the appalling moral choices that you sometimes have to make. It is not for nothing that medical ethics has become a growth subject, though I notice that writings on the subject from within the profession often draw only a very thin line between ethics and etiquette. There is a potential difference between things which are professionally appropriate and things which are morally right, and it is a difference which in some circumstances may have to be watched.

But in general it is true, isn't it, that the medical profession has become burdened with more and more of people's insoluble personal problems and more and more decisions of principle which may have wide social repercussions? This is partly the consequence of your own successes. New techniques create new moral choices. In part you are trapped in the confusions of a society which is no longer sure of its own moral basis and so tries to push its decisions off on to convenient scapegoats.

A recent writer tried to imagine the kind of letters that might be published in *The Times* after a leading article deploring the decline in moral standards, with the usual references to violence, drugs, divorce, abortions, and so forth. Some letters would dispute the facts. What was the data base for the statistics? Some would question whether the facts, if agreed, represent a moral decline at all. Isn't it healthier that people should make their own choices, at least on matters which affect only themselves, rather than be restrained by fear of punishment or social disapproval? Others might go further and point to the shortcomings of a social system which encourages escape or violent antisocial responses as the only way in which the relatively deprived can express themselves. A philosopher might criticise all the previous letters by pointing out that the very notion of moral decline is incoherent since moral attitudes are irredeemably subjective and relate only to particular cultures or subcultures. *The Times* then rounds off the whole

correspondence by saying that there is obviously a need for more research or, if a different leader writer is in charge, by blaming the Church for "its deafening silence," and complaining that the Ten Commandments are no longer read frequently enough.

We live in an age of moral confusion in which we disagree not just about our moral choices but about the basis of our moral diagnosis and the very concepts in which we try to tackle it.

Voluntary guidelines?

And the Ten Commandments? There is some sharp truth in the cartoon which showed Moses receiving the stone tablets and saying to the Lord, "You know, Lord, I think they'd go down better if we called them voluntary guidelines."

Where then, in our confused society, can we find our moral roots, and the kind of moral guidance that we need so desperately? For those standing in the biblical tradition the answers may at first seem easy. I suspect, though, that many do not realise the sheer difficulty of applying this tradition with integrity to the problems of our very different society. To take only one example, the history of responses to the command "Thou shalt not kill" is enough to fill whole libraries. A doctor may have profound respect for human life in all its forms. Yet he may constantly have to face dilemmas about whose life must be given priority, what quality of life must be safeguarded, and so on. The commandment may provide a background, a sense that there are moral demands on us that are not just the product of our own feelings and circumstances, but it does not provide answers.

For those who do not stand in the biblical tradition, and for whom the Ten Commandments belong only to a distant religious past, there may be no less of a desire to make valid moral choices, but the uncertainties may be even more crippling. What right have we, in the absence of an agreed moral basis, to force our moral insights on to other people?

I have been painting a depressing picture. But it is not all depressing. I believe in fact that there are some moral roots in our society, roots from which we can draw nourishment, roots which go back to our religious heritage, but have survived in people who would no longer class themselves as religious. Such roots can therefore be used to sustain moral decisions right across the spectrum of our society. And that is important for a profession which has to serve everybody, irrespective of belief. Given time I believe that we could trace them back to that love of God and love of our neighbour which summarise the biblical moral tradition. But rather than try to do that, let me spell out briefly, and in more modern language, what I believe these moral roots are.

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Basic value of respect

I see two basic values and two attitudes of mind which may help us to find our bearings. The two basic values are respect for persons and respect for the quality of human interrelatedness. And the two attitudes of mind are wonder and the readiness to admit ignorance.

Respect for persons seems obvious and I need not dwell on it. But it is worth pointing out that it is not obvious in all circumstances and in all cultures. Having just returned from a visit to the Soviet Union I am impressed by the extent to which, in that kind of society, ideology is often felt to be more important than actual people. It is a strain which is not entirely foreign to our own society, which is why the basic value has to be asserted again and again. People matter more than things. People matter more than ideas and systems. And this is why systems exist for people and not people for systems.

But then we also have to respect the quality of relationships between people. And this balances the individualism inherent in what I have just been saying about people mattering. We exist not just for ourselves but for each other. And that means that decisions about ourselves have to include this extra dimension of sensitivity towards our common life.

I have often noticed how in medical ethics one of the most difficult problems is how to get this balance right—the balance between the entirely proper and inevitable concern for the individual need directly confronting us and the wider implications of whatever we decide to do, for all those other people whose needs may be no less real but are not our immediate concern. Decisions always have an individual dimension and a social dimension, and this is why the two values of individual worth and human interrelatedness always have to be held together. An abortion, for instance, may appear to be an individual decision. But what is it doing to the family? What are its wider social implications as part of the gradual erosion of feeling in a crucial area of human responsibility?

Wonder and admission of ignorance

This is perhaps where our two attitudes of mind may help us—I have called them wonder and the admission of ignorance.

We have one of those popular posters stuck up at home with a picture of the Grand Canyon and the words "To wonder is to begin

to understand." To wonder is also to begin to worship. And in terms of our respect for people, surely wonder is the beginning of all true care.

A sense of awe and wonder about the world we live in, wonder at the mystery of living things, awe in face of the mystery of human personality from its almost indistinguishable beginnings to its full flowering, this surely ought to be part of any normal human sensitivity. And it is especially crucial in those whose caring role has to be combined with some very sharp analysis of what makes people actually tick. When we have gone through all the explanations, when we think we know, say, what an embryo is in biological terms, there still has to be a sense of awe at something so intimately bound up with the origins of human life.

But with this there has to go an admission of ignorance, an ignorance which undermines all dogmatic assertions that this or that policy is indubitably right. If wonder is the first step towards understanding humility is the first step in moral maturity. And this is where a reminder of religious perspectives is important. We are not gods. We see only part of the picture. We are inherently fallible. And the very confusions and uncertainty of our day can remind us of that fallibility.

But to know that one is fallible under God is very different from just being a muddled human being. If at times we feel we are groping in the dark and being given responsibilities too great for us we can also know that the God who sees and knows us in our weakness, forgives and restores us in his love. It thus becomes possible to make the decisions which have to be made without complacency and without constant anxiety because the God who gives us his law on Sinai is also the God of love and forgiveness who has visited and redeemed his people.

In 1986 the ecumenical church service, which is traditionally held before the start of the BMA's annual representative meeting, was in St Mary's Parish Church, Scarborough. The Most Reverend and Right Honourable John Habgood, the Lord Archbishop of York, preached the sermon, which is reproduced here.

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- 2 *New English Bible*. St Matthew xix, 16-30.

Royal Infirmary, Edinburgh, after a drawing by John Elphinstone (Wellcome Institute Library).