

# The Dictatorship of Freedom

Just about a generation ago, or perhaps nearly two, there was a strong upsurge of protest at the imposition of 'old-fashioned values' on the modern population. The new 'post-Christian' majority of Western society resented the enforcement of outmoded moral standards on newly-liberated secular society.

There was no such thing as 'right and wrong', we were told. There were no absolutes of good and evil any more; they belonged to a bygone age of religious paternalism. God, if he had ever existed, was now declared dead. This 'new morality' looked suspiciously like the old immorality, snatched from the seamy shadow-world of unspoken depravity and illicit sexual affairs and brought into the supposed 'daylight' of open acceptance. If it seemed OK to you, then it was OK. No-one had any right to pass judgment on anyone else's apparent morality or lack of it.

There were some exceptions, of course. Western society could hardly endorse the complete abandonment of values, could it? Murder was still wrong, treating other people badly (in various ways) could not be accepted, or else society itself would have fallen apart very rapidly.

Despite their philosophical commitment to 'no absolute values', somehow those in authority needed to make sure that there was still some framework of values that defined what was acceptable or not in the modern world. Having discarded any external reference to a righteous God with clearly stated codes of right and wrong, nonetheless they needed to establish their own laws to avoid complete social disintegration. Did nobody see that they were living inconsistently and also imposing inconsistent controls on the population?

Theoretically, if there really were no such thing as absolute right and wrong, then these laws had no right to exist. But, if we did not have such laws and society fell apart as a result, then we needed to invent them. We couldn't call them absolute values (because we no longer believed in those), so we called them relative values. And then imposed them as absolutes! If anyone called out the inconsistency at the time, they were ignored.

Christians (and some others) who took a stand on fixed moral values were held up to public ridicule and abuse, especially if they were suspected of wanting to enforce their standards on other people or on society as a whole.

Much of that criticism was completely valid. The moral values of the Old Testament were delivered to the Jewish people and the history of the time shows that other surrounding nations did not necessarily follow the same lines. The instructions to Christians in the New Testament were precisely that – instructions to Christian believers, not to the world around them. Proclaiming the good news of Jesus and the kingdom of God was not an attempt to impose their values on those who heard, but an appeal to them to respond to the grace of God and allow him to change their lives from the inside. The institutionalisation of Christianity into so-called 'Christian countries' was exactly the opposite, codifying 'Christian values' into laws for all the population to follow, irrespective of their faith or lack of it. Sadly these two opposite approaches have often been seen as one and the same!

The years have passed. Many – and not only the older generations – bemoan the evident decline of society, with symptoms greeting us every day in the local, national and international news. Yes, the rise of westernisation in so-called 'developing countries' has brought with it a clamour for the embracing of 'western values', which often means throwing off many or all of the restraints of local traditions and values and the adoption of more 'liberal values', much to the dismay of the upholders of traditional national values in many different cultures.

Some on the 'Christian right' in Western countries have taken a stand against this apparent moral degeneration and have called for a return to 'Christian values' in the societies in which they live.

The reaction which they might experience if that were ever to happen might be similar to the reaction to developments in Brunei in April 2019. The decision by the ageing Sultan to impose Islamic Sharia

law, punishing adultery and homosexual practice by stoning to death attracted what seemed like unanimous international condemnation. If there were any who approved, they kept a very low profile.

The strength of reaction is ironic. Those with the strongest reaction are people who uphold the 'rights' of sexual freedom, who condemn neither adultery nor homosexual intercourse. Two generations ago, they would have been at the forefront of those who clamoured for the removal of 'old-fashioned values', but what do they do now?

They call for the international condemnation and boycotting of those who wish to impose sanctions on the freedoms they hold dear. Worldwide public opinion is mustered against what they see as wrong, the curtailment of sexual freedom. Those who once agitated against the imposition of standards on them and their own 'freedoms' are now imposing their own sense of 'right and wrong' on a regime that does not recognise the same standards as they do.

They have become absolutists. They are right and anyone who disagrees with them is wrong, fit only for international condemnation. Can they not see the inconsistency of their own position?

I am not arguing for the imposition of Sharia law. Far from it! I do not believe that death by stoning is appropriate for adultery or homosexual intercourse. In fact, I don't think that the state needs to be involved in such matters at all. But I do believe that both practices are wrong.

It is also wrong to seek to impose standards on those who do not share them. It is wrong when institutional 'Christianity' tries to impose 'Christian values' on an otherwise secular society. It is wrong whenever any religious legalism is imposed on the population, just as it was when the Pharisees did it (to Jews!) in first-century Judea. It is also wrong when a supposedly 'liberal' society seeks to impose its liberality on those who do not agree.

As a Christian believer, I am convinced that adultery is wrong. That does not make me 'adulterophobic' or a hater of adulterers. I am convinced that homosexual intercourse is wrong, but that does not make me homophobic. I am convinced that Islam is wrong, but that does not make me hate all Muslims. The vocabulary is wrong and the words are inappropriate. 'Phobic' means 'having a fear of', and I am not afraid of adultery, homosexuality or Islam. I simply believe that they are all wrong. But that still does not make me antagonistic to those who practise them.

No doubt there will be those that believe that I am wrong. Perhaps they would wish to write me off as legalistic. Why? Because I do not conform to the supposedly liberal standards which they believe are the new absolutes? I do not condemn them for their different values, even though I profoundly disagree with them. They may disagree just as profoundly with my values, but disagreement is no reason for condemnation in either direction.

'Christian' legalism has a lot to answer for. 'Hate the sin but love the sinner' is often quoted but usually ignored. There has been too long a history of hating the perpetrator and now those who once suffered that hatred are meting it out to those they disagree with. Just a brief glance at the life of Jesus shows a polar opposite. The legalists, trying to entrap him, brought a woman to him who had been caught in the act of adultery and quoted the Old Testament law which (like the present-day Sharia) designated stoning to death as the appropriate punishment.

Pointedly, Jesus tells the woman that he does not condemn her but also tells her not to sin again. He does not even utter a word to condemn the accusers but simply suggests that the first stone should be thrown by anyone there who is sinless. The fact that they all skulk away reveals that they found themselves condemned and so could not carry out the sentence.

Where does that leave the modern-day proponents of 'liberal' legalism? Still attempting to exercise their dictatorship of 'freedom' ?

Dave Taylor      April 2019

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