

NO GOD - NO MORAL STANDARDS?

Islamic theocratic societies have no basis for human rights in their belief system. Are secular humanists or atheists able to promote and guarantee human rights?

If God does not exist then "everything is permitted" wrote Dostoevsky. The playwright Eugene Ionesco drew the conclusion that life with God is absurd.¹ After Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn had received the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, he described in his speech what was wrong with our world. He said, "More than half a century ago, while I was still a child, I recall hearing a number of older people offer the following explanation for the great disaster that had befallen Russia "Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened."² And because Russia had forgotten God its citizens lost their basic rights. In the former USSR the position was that full religious freedom was guaranteed by the Constitution and the laws. Art. 52 of the 1977 Constitution of the USSR declared: "Freedom of conscience, that is the right to profess any religion or not to profess any religion, to perform religious rites or to conduct atheistic propaganda shall be guaranteed for all citizens of the USSR. Incitement of hostility and hatred on religious grounds shall be prohibited."³ But this article did not guarantee religious freedom as has been claimed by registered Soviet church leaders in dealing with Western church leaders. In fact, the article gives only atheists the right to propagate their views. Kent Hill comments, "Article 52 of the Soviet Constitution, which allegedly guarantees the right of religious worship, made crystal clear the state's exclusive access to the public through the media on matters of religion. Anti-religious propaganda was specifically guaranteed, with no similar right provided for believers. Scientific Marxism risked no argument about 'its reasonable and empirically grounded' world view."⁴

Since man is by nature religious, he cannot live without something to worship. Anyone who does not worship the God who has revealed Himself in the Christian Scriptures will find some ideology or something else in which to put his trust. American columnist William Raspberry, writing from Washington in the *Edmonton Journal*, speaking on behalf of "intellectuals of the left", believes that since people without religion "find their lives emptier", people of his persuasion should pursue the development of a "civil religion", which would comprise "a collection of beliefs, symbols and rituals with respect to sacred things."⁵

A secular state, which reduces faith to private conscience and does not accept the Christian church as a community which testifies to transcendent moral standards, creates a framework for totalitarianism and intolerance. Richard Neuhaus argues that a secular state will come to the relativization of all values. "The totalitarian alternative edges in from the wings, waiting impatiently for the stage to be cleared of competing actors. Most important is that the state be cleared of those religious actors that presume to assert absolute values and thus pose such a troublesome check upon the pretensions of the state. The state is not waiting with a set of absolute values of its own or with a ready-made religion. Far from waiting with a package of absolutes, in a society where the remnants of procedural democracy survive, the state may be absolutely committed to only the relativization of all values."⁶

In our post-modern times we should clearly state that it is hypocritical to say that values are neutral in a progressive society. We deal with values based on a world-view. And one's world-view determines one's view of morality, human rights, justice and so on. There is always a conflict of values in a pluralistic society. And those in government have their own set of values which they seek to impose on the nation. If relativism is the current world-view operating within the government, Christians who believe in absolute standards will be harassed in some form or another. For example, Human Life International (HLI), a Catholic pro-life, pro-family group, was told by Revenue Canada that it will revoke HLI'S registration as educational charity because its efforts are too one-sided. Revenue Canada considers the group "political" in intent because "its purpose is to promote an anti-abortion attitude of mind." But if a Christian group is threatened with loss of charitable status, why not non-Christian groups who have their own political agenda? Theresa Hell, HLI's Canadian executive director, notes that Revenue Canada gives charitable status to a fund-raising arm of the Canadian Abortion Rights Action League (CARAL), To Every Woman's Health Centre in Vancouver and Planned Parenthood, all militant promoters of abortion and opponents of pro-life.⁷

If there is no God, man must create his own objective values which he has to obey. Man is free to create his own moral "standards". And this seems to be the prevalent view of modern man. The French existentialist, Jean Paul Satre (1905-1980), believed that man is characterized by an awesome degree of freedom. There is no limitation placed upon his freedom. Satre reminded us that "God is dead", quoting Nietzsche. He wrote that man should feel free to invent his own values, goals and purposes. He said that "there is no human nature because there is no God".⁸

"If God does not exist we find no values or commands to turn to, which legitimize our conduct. So, in the bright realm of values, we have no excuse behind us, nor justification before us. We are alone, with no excuses."⁹

Erich Fromm claims that human reason by itself is to guide man to proper standards of moral behaviour. He insists that "valid ethical norms can be formed by man's reason and by it alone," and that "the great tradition of humanistic ethical thought has laid the foundation for value systems based on man's autonomy and reason."¹⁰

When man becomes his own standard and measure of all things, denies the existence of God and proclaims himself to be the mere product of the process of evolution, he takes a minimal view of human life. He promotes abortion, as in his view, women have the right to choose whatever they think is right. He also becomes highly individualistic in his choices. He will agree with Jacques P. Thiroux, who calls his ethical system "humanitarian ethics". Thiroux feels that "both non monogamous and group marriages are moral... If no one outside them is harmed [other than that the group's style of living is not to his taste], then there seems to be nothing immoral about these marriages in themselves".¹¹

The idea that man can be good without God is a modern invention. George Grant correctly observed that from the dawn of western civilization until the 19th century the

common consensus was that "piety" was necessary for public good. This view was strenuously held in the pre-Christian as well as in the Christian era.¹²

Are human rights possible if God is dead and man the creator of his own values? A world view based on naturalistic evolution cannot provide a reasonable foundation for either the universality or the permanence of human rights. It was this social Darwinism that underlay the German Nazis' repudiation of Biblical moral standards.¹³ Without a belief in God and man's uniqueness as His image bearer all that is left is a species chauvinism. If there is no God, why should man possess rights that are absolute, "engraved in stone"? Why should a dog or a cat not have the same rights as a man?

If there are no absolute standards, if the latter are only a matter of opinion or feelings, or cultural differences, then tolerance itself is relative, and, as consequence in secular Western society, human rights are also relative. They can be given or taken away at will, as they are an invention of the mind – man's free choice. Os Guinness observed, "If God is dead, we must face the fact that nature is morally indifferent, rationality is only a tool of power, and human rights are a fiction."¹⁴

I concur with Norman Geisler's conclusion, "A purely human basis for government provides no ultimate guarantee of human rights. Each government can do that which is right in its own eyes. Might makes right. Where man is under no moral law, he becomes his own law."¹⁵

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