

Who Stole Britain's Morals?

JON GARVEY *explains why the 'moral crusade' is not enough.*

This year everyone is talking about the decline in Britain's morals. It's as if we've all finally woken from a deep sleep to the realisation that something actually *has* gone wrong with our nation, and that it wasn't just in the imagination of Mary Whitehouse and Malcolm Muggeridge. We used to be told that nothing need be done. Then that nothing *could* be done. Now even the politicians agree that something *must* be done.

As Christians we should not be slow to respond to this movement, because it confirms what we have been saying for decades, and because it is our priestly duty to help our fellow Britons to move from regret to the repentance which could save the nation. But if we are to have anything prophetic to say to our society, we need to understand for ourselves just what has gone wrong. We need to see clearly what has to change if the present hand-wringing is to lead to any real restoration of public morality.

The trouble at the moment is that society is longing for a moral renewal, without realising that it has embraced a view of the world which more or less guarantees that such a renewal cannot happen. We are like the man in the proverb who is trying to revive a dead horse by beating it harder, when it is the very beating that has killed it. And so in the same news bulletin, we hear everyone crying out for a more moral society, whilst any *actual* moral issue is settled on the basis of the very world-view which has created our problems in the first place.

Let me explain. Everybody agrees that once upon a time not only laws, but day-to-day values, were based on the morality found in the 10 commandments. Christians, of course, bemoan the fact that this is no longer so. But the real change is not that we have abandoned the idea of moral absolutes; instead, we have substituted one absolute for another in our world-view. The 10 commandments were only absolutes because they were spoken by God himself, who has an absolute right to dictate our morals. The real change in our society came when the principle of God as our moral ruler was replaced by the principle of

human autonomy, or in other words the principle that each of us has an absolute right to dictate our *own* morals.

"Autonomy" sounds a bit technical and complicated, but it is in fact the very word that was used in the news bulletins recently about the case of the sick child whose parents were granted the right to refuse medical treatment. The news said the case established the *autonomy* of parents in such situations, over against the medical authorities.

We find that this is the basis for deciding all the ethical and moral questions around us. What is the foundation for our abortion laws? *Autonomy* - a woman's right to choose. Why did the establishment condemn Anne Atkins for calling homosexual acts sinful on *Thought for the Day* recently? *Autonomy* - the right to define one's own sexuality. Why legislate against strikes?

Without God, there is no basis for morality

Autonomy - the right of employers to run firms their way, and the right of consumers to consume without interruption. The great god *Autonomy*, which was first worshipped by the Enlightenment philosophers 200 years ago when they announced the *Age of Reason*, now reigns unchallenged everywhere.

One major result of this change is the loss of the idea of *authority*. Once, people respected authority because in the last analysis it depended on God's authority (Romans 13.1). The government had the right to rule because God established it, which is why we have a Coronation Oath and prayers before Parliament sits. Parents were honoured (even by teenagers!), teachers obeyed, husbands regarded and church leaders respected because they had the authority of God in their particular roles.

Now we seldom experience governments governing, but instead hear their policies being criticised daily by journalists who never made a vital decision in their lives. Do we wonder that children are unteachable when we adults challenge the authority of parents, sports referees,

governments and even God's law itself?

But someone will argue that nobody claims human autonomy to be absolute. Yes, we should be free to make choices, but only if others are not hurt in the process. This is the basis on which the politicians are trying to rebuild public morality. "Teach kids to respect others," they say, "and things will get better." But if kids have already been taught that they are the best judges of what is right or wrong for them, what valid reason can we give them for submitting to somebody else's idea of social morality? If "fornication" is an outdated word, why hold on to old-fashioned "respect"? And why should consideration for others be a moral absolute anyway? The logical outcome of autonomy, as Nietzsche and Hitler found, is to do what is right for me regardless of others. If human autonomy really is the correct basis for morality, then Britain today is as moral as can be!

So respect for others makes no sense where autonomy rules. But it makes complete sense where the fear of God rules, because the Almighty God's command to love our neighbour is sufficient reason for respect for others to be an absolute. Teach kids that God is our lawgiver, and they will have a logical reason to obey his laws.

Crucial choice

None of the religious minorities will object to that - the Jews, the Moslems and the Hindus already know it, and despise "Christian" Britain for ignoring it. The only objectors are those who have grown up to worship *Autonomy* - which really means, to worship themselves, for this was the sin of Adam and Eve in the garden.

The politicians - and in fact all those troubled people who see the need for a change in our moral climate - have to make a crucial choice. They have to realise that they can only have a true morality if they acknowledge the God from whom it comes. Without God, there is no basis for morality; surely the state of our nation is evidence enough of that. If people continue to make human autonomy the basis for morality, then they will find it to be one of those idols of wood which cannot save. **PT**