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The Secular Hatred of the Ten Commandments

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The Ten Commandments are all well and good, the radical separationists have argued, just out of place in the public arena. Now, as that controversy reaches a new phase, we can see that far more than church-state separationism drives the hostility of some secularists. They actually hate the Ten Commandments.

Harry Binswanger of the Ayn Rand Institute argues that the Ten Commandments represent a primitive conception of law and morality [that] flatly contradicts American values." As you might expect, the first five commandments draw Binswanger's hottest fire. The fact that the Ten Commandments begin with a declaration that, "I am the Lord thy God," offends Binswanger because this implies that "the individual is not an independent being with a right to live his own life but the vassal of an invisible Lord." What a concept! We cannot accuse Binswanger of misunderstanding the commandment, but of rejecting it outright.

Binswanger, a former college teacher, is now professor of philosophy at the "Objectivist Graduate Center of the Ayn Rand Institute." Never heard of it? Objectivism is the philosophical system proposed by novelist Ayn Rand, a Russian immigrant who exercised a considerable influence on the conservative movement in America. Her primary influence remains evident in the work of economists like Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan, who was very close to Ms. Rand and her movement. The central concept of objectivism is the primacy of rational self-interest above all other goods. In other words, the individual's highest purpose is to serve his or her own self-interest. Altruism is explicitly rejected, as is any supernatural morality or claim.

As would be expected, the sexual ethics of the movement undermined all traditional moral norms, and objectivist economic ethics stressed the freedom of the individual to maximize material gain. This last aspect was very attractive to some leading political and economic conservatives in the middle of the twentieth century, who saw the principle of a free market being threatened by massive government growth and intervention in the economy.

As conservative patriarch William F. Buckley, Jr. traces in his recent novel, *Getting it Right*, the success of the conservative movement in America required a break with Ayn Rand and her movement. Objectivists look at religious conservatives with disdain and pity.

Thus, Binswanger is objectivism's perfect prophet for the new millennium. The Ten Commandments represent everything he rejects in Christianity and any form of supernaturalism. According to his worldview, the human being is a "free, independent, sovereign individual who exists for his own sake," not for the glory of his Creator.

The idea of divine judgment is rejected as repressive. God's promise to punish idolaters to the third and fourth generation is "an impossible and degrading concept." The latter commandments simply state the obvious, Binswanger

claims, but the first set of commandments “orders you to bow, fawn, grovel and obey.” To Binswanger, “This is impossible to reconcile with the American concept of a self-reliant, self-owning individual.” [see Binswanger's article]

In sum, “The basic philosophy of the Ten Commandments is the polar opposite of the philosophy underlying the American ideal of a free society.” Binswanger wants nothing to do with a God who has a greater claim on us than we have on ourselves. Hands off, he demands. The Ten Commandments are for pathetically weak and needy people.

A similar rejection of the Ten Commandments comes from a different direction, but with equal force, when Alan Dershowitz claims that “our nation was founded on a rejection of much of what is in the actual content of the commandments.”

Dershowitz, a professor of law at Harvard University, may be the nation’s most familiar legal scholar—known to the public as a member of the famous [or infamous] “dream team” assembled by O. J. Simpson for his murder trial. In a recent Los Angeles Times opinion piece, Dershowitz also aims his attack at the first table of the Ten Commandments. Americans know only a “CliffsNotes” version of the commandments, he claims, and would find the real commandments “much more controversial.” [see Dershowitz's article]

The real text of the Ten Commandments “include God’s assertion that he is ‘a jealous God’ and his threat to visit ‘the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation’.” Dershowitz finds this absolutely unacceptable. “Can anything be more un-American?” With Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine, Dershowitz finds these commandments “contrary to every principle of moral judgment.”

Devotion to the Ten Commandments is misplaced, he argues. “The rules we accept actually precede the Ten Commandments and are accepted by all civilized nations. The remaining provisions . . . the United States has generally rejected.”

For years, Mr. Dershowitz has argued for a secular vision of Judaism. Indeed, though allowing for Jews who prefer a “God-centered Judaism,” Dershowitz insists that Judaism does not require belief in God—or His commandments.

Needless to say, Professor Dershowitz does not want to see a monument to the Ten Commandments in a public space. Furthermore, they “do not even belong—at least without some amendments and explanatory footnotes, in the hearts and minds of contemporary Americans.”

Well, there you have it. The hostility to the Ten Commandments turns out to be far more basic than the question of their public display. The Ten Commandments do serve as a potent reminder that we are not our own, but are created to serve the living God and obligated to obey His laws. We are not the sovereign individuals of objectivist philosophy nor the enlightened rationalists of Jefferson and Paine. We are not our own, after all.

Binswanger and Dershowitz are agreed in identifying the Ten Commandments as a fundamentally repressive and dangerous text. The modern concept of personal autonomy—the basic worldview shared by both men—is antithetical to the spirit and substance of the Ten Commandments. If God exists, and if He has revealed His commandments to us, then we are not really autonomous at all. The basic meaning of autonomy is to be one’s own lawgiver. The Ten Commandments put an end to all claims of human autonomy.

The modern age takes personal autonomy as a given. Thus, the Ten Commandments are among the most subversive words ever revealed to humanity. The commandments subvert our arrogance and pull the rug out from under our pretensions. We are left humbled and accountable, told that we shall and shall not—all without prior negotiation or human legislation.

The God who gave us the Ten Commandments fully expects to be God. That’s bad news for the idea of a “free, independent, sovereign individual who exists for his own sake.” That myth will die a hard death.

