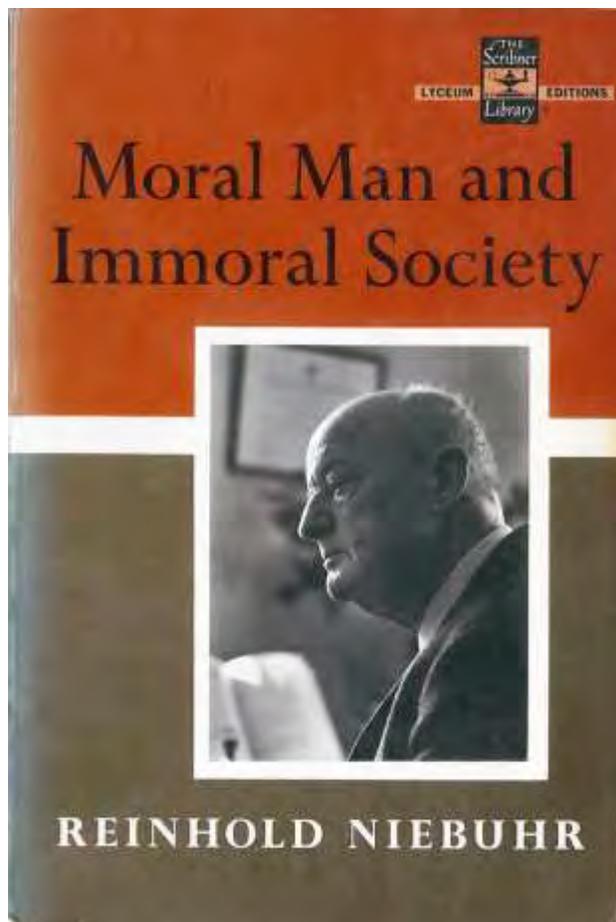


The “Ten Commandments” for Groups

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In the preface to the 1960 edition of *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), Reinhold Niebuhr wrote:

The central thesis was, and is, that the Liberal Movement, both religious and secular, seemed to be unconscious of the basic difference between the morality of individuals, and the collectives, whether races, classes, or nations.

Now, in 2016, when ISIS attempts to justify genocide and impose Sharia law on other groups, there is increased political party intolerance and self-interest in US political discourse, and the LGBT community attempting to impose its bathroom morality on all other people, it is clearer than ever that people still seem to behave better as individuals than in groups, and that the liberal West has failed to make progress in addressing the problems unethical and uncivil behavior of groups.

One reason for this failure is that long ago standards for personal behavior and interpersonal behavior developed. These standards evolved over centuries and were encapsulated in the Ten Commandments in the Bible, however they did not originate there. The *Code of Hammurabi* that preceded the Bible by perhaps one thousand years

contains most of these standards for individuals. It is important to understand that these standards are not arbitrary, nor were they generated by consensus. They evolved in order to allow human societies to function, and like Darwin's theses regarding human adaptation, civilizations began to flourish when individuals practiced these commandments.

However, from Ancient times through the Middle Ages, people largely lived in groups and were separated from other groups. Tribal elders or town mayors largely dictated the politics, economy, and morality of their community, and such groups tended to have a great deal of autonomy, even if they were part of some larger empire. If an individual didn't like the standards of their birth group, they were shunned, expelled, or killed. However, while these groups enforced a code of behavior that reflected their own particular history, geographical setting, and leadership, they all followed the spirit of the Ten Commandments.

The Social Consciousness of Individuals

By “spirit of the Ten Commandments” I am referring to an individual consciousness that transcends self-centeredness, and that allowed people to live together in groups. This meant respect for the society and all its members. This began with respect for the parents whose job it was to instill social values in children, and then the lives, property, and social commitments (like marriage) that were made by others. Many of the commandments were posed in the form of “Do Not”—do not have false gods, kill, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness, or envy. While the literal rules known as the Ten Commandments are found in the Hebrew Bible, every other civilization—Chinese, Hindu, Persian, Greek, Roman, and Christian—had traditions and rules that reflected this spirit.

Societies had to organize in ways that honored the spirit of the Ten Commandments, or they simply ceased to function. This was more likely what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah or the ancient Mayan civilization than an instantaneous and cataclysmic event. Just as the individual components of a grandfather clock, a computer, or the human body each perform some task that serves the functionality of the whole, they also cannot interfere with the operation of the other gears, components, or organs without causing system dysfunction and collapse. A society is, by definition a social system, and all systems have operating principles that enable them to run. The “spirit of the Ten Commandments” is merely principles that must be followed for a human civilization to exist. Individuals in functional societies are required to have a basic social consciousness that can transcend individual selfishness and respect other individuals, their needs, and the organization of the society as a whole.

Pluralism and the Need to Transcend Group Selfishness

Group selfishness has always been a problem and was the main reason Reinhold Niebuhr wrote in his book that

Our contemporary culture fails to realize the power, extent, and persistence of group egoism in human relations. It may be possible, though it is never easy, to establish just relations between individuals within a group purely by moral and rational suasion and accommodation. In inter-group relations this is practically an impossibility. The relations between groups must always be predominantly political rather than ethical,...

By group selfishness, Niebuhr was referring to any human group. The collective identification of individuals with group goals can lead to group egoism in any kind of group—a religion, an ideology, race, ethnicity, nationality, or gender identity to name a few. Transcending this identity comes later, and has been more difficult, than transcending group identity.

As individuals develop, their perceptions widen. When a baby is born it only perceives basic physical needs, food from a nipple, warmth from an embrace, and discomfort from stomach gas or soiled diapers. We eventually transcend that initial identity in a family during the first few years, and transcend our family identity in middle school, when we discover other students came from different types of families. However, middle schools are only reflective of a larger community the size of a town or a tribe, and many people, shielded from perceptions that extend beyond provincial communities, never form adequate perceptions of the entire world to transcend those group identities.

For most of human history it has been rare that individuals have been able to transcend group consciousness. Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan stands out as an exemplary teaching on the topic, for the Samaritan recognized the injured man based on his identity as a human being needing help, and not as a member of another group and therefore less worthy of his compassion.

The concept of universal human rights was born in the context of separation of church and state, first in Holland after Spanish rule was thrown off, and next in the United States when British rule was cast off. Both these countries were forced to accept religious pluralism if they were to get a majority of people to adopt a constitution, for both societies were religiously diverse. The concept of human rights developed so far is a first step towards the development of a "Ten Commandments for Groups" but it doesn't really go beyond the first commandment "thou shall have no other gods before me." What I mean by this is that group identity cannot be put higher than the identity that transcends all groups.

Whether it be Yahweh, Allah, Jesus, Democracy, National Socialism, Communism, the Republican Party, the Democratic Party, LGBT pride, or Black Lives Matter that cements together a group identity, such a group can only function meaningfully in a world of peace and harmony when it is capable of self-transcendence and sees itself and its mission in the context of a wider world. And, this is just the spirit of the first commandment for groups.

The conflict among all kinds of groups in the world today is the result of the inability to transcend group consciousness. Those people who have been able to, like Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., who reveal the transcendent consciousness of the good Samaritan in the context of groups, have been symbols of hope that transcending group selfishness may be a real possibility.

What About Other Commandments?

A lot of other work is needed to translate the spirit of the other biblical commandments individuals into a group context. In the short space available here, I will use examples of the fifth commandment: "Honor you father and mother," and the eighth commandment "You shall not steal."

Honor Your Father and Mother

The social function of parents is to care for, socialize, and teach children how to live on their own as adults. They pass on what they have learned from their ancestors, the rules of the society they live in, and what they have learned on their own. Societies are too complex for people figure out on their own, the wisdom of thousands of years of human experience is reflected in unconscious elements of language and culture. Without parents performing this basic role, children have a severe disadvantage in school, in society, and in life. When children become adults, they might realize that some of what they learned needs to be modified a bit for their own children, and that is how individuals, societies, and civilizations adapt to an ever-changing world.

On the group level, this commandment translates into "honor the institutions, traditions, values, and knowledge passed on by the previous generation." The knowledge, traditions, and institutions that gave

birth to the social group you were born in were at least partially functional or you would not have been born. However, the world goes on and these institutions should be improved upon and transformed in ways that make them serve the entire society better.

There are two ways to disobey this commandment: blind obedience to and blind rejection of what you were given by your society. Blind obedience is often displayed as religious or ideological fundamentalism or absolute literal sacrifice to group scriptures or leaders. Blind rejection means rejection of an entire set of social institutions and teachings, because some components aren't working well enough. These are both kneejerk reactions to the call for social change that fail to adopt a transcendent perspective, and they can both become socially destructive and cause needless pain and death.

Thou Shall Not Steal

The group equivalent of this is when one group steals from another group. In modern societies this can be done by economic institutions that have monopolies and charge excessive prices and fees that are above normal market prices. Group stealing also occurs when interest groups use governments to collect funds in the form of taxes from one group and then distribute to other groups unequally. This can be as blatant as Tutsis taxing Hutus and distributing to other Tutsis in Rwanda, or more subtly by taxing people who work and giving the money to people who are healthy but refuse to work. Job and housing discrimination on the basis of race or sex is also a subtle form of group theft, while economic protectionism can be the basis for international theft.

Economic injustice often becomes a rationale for theft. Within groups, as Niebuhr mentioned, it is easier to use peer pressure and moral codes to help those being treated unjustly, without literally engaging in overt theft. However this is more difficult between groups whose cultural and behavior patterns are different. For example the attitudes towards work, borrowing, and lending in Germany as opposed to those in Greece has put severe pressure on the functionality of the Euro as a viable currency when it is perceived that Greece is stealing from Germany through institutional economic failures that cause bailouts.

Conclusion

For peace and harmony to occur in the contemporary world, which is characterized by globalism, large migrations, and cultural pluralism, group interests need to be transcended by application of the equivalent of a "Ten Commandments for Groups" that successful human civilizations learned and put into practice for individuals and interpersonal behavior. The UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights is only a start, and they only function at the level of "negative rights" that acknowledge every person, regardless of race, nationality, ethnicity, religion, ideology, or sex has an equal right to participate in this world as a human being. The so-called "positive rights" like the "right to housing" are not genuine rights but are ideals contingent upon principled forms of social organization, ingenuity, resources, and work ethic that can bring these ideals to fruition.

Currently, the level of consciousness reflected in many "positive rights" is not implemented on the basis of group respect that honors commandments such as "thou shall not steal" or "thou shall not covet," thereby causing great inter-group strife, belligerency, and even genocide. There are often more demands to "give another person a fish" than "teaching a another person to fish" and "allowing another person from another group to fish." But even here, the metaphor breaks down, for in a global community, sustainable fishing is also a requirement, so it might be more appropriate to "teach another person, or group, to farm fish sustainably."

I believe that, in the long run whether after a few years, or several civilizations collapses, learning to understand and apply the spirit of the Ten Commandments for groups will be as important as continuing to teach the spirit of the Ten Commandments to individuals. Of course, in the modern world these commandments will not be justified by scripture alone, as commandments are something parents or kings give to people who have not achieved a level of consciousness that understands *why* these commandments are important. In the modern world, we cannot simply accept statements like "the sun revolves around the earth" or "the earth revolves around the sun," without having more background understanding of the nature of gravity and centrifugal and centripetal forces.

Likewise, in a mature society we cannot expect people to believe in the spirit of the Ten Commandments, for either individuals or groups, because God, the Bible, or the Quran said so. While the fifth Group Commandment "*honor inherited social institutions and traditions,*" would tell us that we should respect those who told us these statements as commands, because they likely did so for a very good reason, we need to document the basis of functional and dysfunctional society with increased historical retrospect backed by social science data. Already, data is being amassed that shows many kneejerk social rules being proposed by all groups are based on group selfishness and not group transcendence, and that they would lead to social dysfunction and collapse rather than to peace, prosperity, and harmony for all.