

## Morality of Presence: A Biblical and Salesian Perspective<sup>1</sup>

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### Biblical Perspective

Very often when we think of Old Testament morality, we generally have the impression that it must have been very legalistic, stressing obedience to an external law and rule of action. Perhaps this view is very heavily influenced by Jesus's condemnation of the legalism and formalism of the scribes and the Pharisees of his day who reduced the whole law to a strict, unbending external conformity to ritualistic practices.

If we try to understand the significance of the Law, especially of the Ten Commandments by placing them in their original context and setting, we will see that the legalism associated with the observance of the Law is a distortion of what the observance of the Ten Commandments was intended to achieve.

There is a deep fission in modern society between religion and morality. Morality is understood here as encompassing "the moral psychology of the agent, his complex affectivity and connatural perceptions of moral facts, ideals and situations"<sup>2</sup> More primitive societies could not easily conceive of morality apart from religion. The great genius of the Ancient Israelites lay in their effort toward the creation of a religious morality. The Ten Commandments may be more honored in the breach than in the observance, but they cannot be forgotten nor ignored. They are indelibly engraved in the consciousness of Western man.

The covenant relationship that God established with his chosen people places all aspects of man's life under the guidance of and consecration to God. It gives all life a religious significance. The Ten Commandments have lost most of their impact today primarily because they have been taken out of their original context which was primarily and essentially religious. To place them in their original historical and religious setting should help to heal the rift which has gradually grown between religion and morality. To resituate them in their original setting does not restrict their application but rather helps us appreciate their universal validity.

The religious character of the Ten Commandments becomes immediately evident when we see them in their entirety in the Old Testament (Ex 20:1-17; Deut.5:16-21). At the very outset, the Old Testament commands dedication to God's invisible but manifest presence by prohibiting all sensory representations. "You shall not carve idols for yourselves in the shape of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth." (Ex 20:4). Martin Buber, the well-known Jewish philosopher, emphasized the religious

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<sup>1</sup> This article was inspired by Albert R. Jonsen, "The Decalogue: Command and Presence," *Thought*, (Autumn, 1963):421-446.

<sup>2</sup> Jonsen, 442.

orientation of the Commandments. In commanding us not to take “the name of the Lord in vain,” the Lord Yahweh commands faith to his name (and by that fact to his reality) by prohibiting the application of that Name to any illusion. “These commandments impose the recognition of the extensive role of the divine leader as He is, not as the people would like to endow or image Him. They bind the community to the reality of God as unique, as beyond imagination, as Holy.”<sup>3</sup>

God’s commandments bring peace and harmony not only between individuals and God but also among themselves. The Law brings them together by common moral convictions. The last six commandments are not merely an expression of the natural law. Their association with the first four (not to carve idols, not to take the Lord’s name in vain, to keep holy the Sabbath, honor our parents) gives rise to their originality. In this context, natural law is seen as the direct expression of Yahweh’s will for his people. The life of the people consists in the common acceptance of one morality coming from Almighty God, who reveals his holiness in his commands, and in the worship this holiness calls for. All of this is summed up in Exodus 19:3-6. Here Yahweh makes his intention known that Israel is his own nation, the object of his special love: “You shall be my special possession, dearer to me than all other people.” But the condition for this is obedience to his command and to the Covenant.

### **Yahweh’s Presence and the Value of the Law**

Yahweh’s presence is the constant, recurring theme of the Old Testament. It is evident in the patriarchal narratives. When speaking to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, he says: “Behold, I am with you.” This is the motif of God’s dealings with men. In Exodus the theme appears on two levels – the Priestly tradition where Yahweh’s presence is stated in terms of the cloud, the ark, the Glory (*Kabod*) and the description of the Tent of Presence. The other is the primitive tradition. Here it is still in terms reminiscent of the patriarchal narratives – “I will be with you.” In Ex 19-20, 32-34, the presence of Yahweh is associated with the commandments. The most concise statement of this relationship is found immediately before the Deuteronomic Decalogue: “What great nation is there that has so close to it as the Lord, our God, is to us whenever we call on Him.” In Ex 19 the great manifestation of God in smoke and fire on Mt. Sinai expresses his presence. And Yahweh instructs Moses to tell the people their response to him should be in worship. “In whatever place I choose for the remembrance of my name, I will come to you and bless you.” (Ex 20:27). This promise of presence is a fitting conclusion to the Commandments.

### **The Importance of God’s Presence**

In Exodus chaps. 32-34, the relationship between Yahweh’s presence and the Commandments is emphasized. These chapters relate the apostasy of Israel and its reconciliation through the intervention of Moses. Yahweh tells Moses: “You and the people whom you have brought up from the land of Egypt are to go up from here to the land I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob I would give to their descendants....I will send an angel before you. But I myself will not go up in your company.” (Ex 33:1-3). But Moses boldly answers: “If thy presence does not go up with me, do not carry us up from here. For

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<sup>3</sup> Jonsen, 429.

how shall it be known that I have found favor in thy sight, I and the people? Is it not in thy going up with us, so that we are distinct, I and the people, from all other people that are on the face of the earth?” (Ex 33-12-17). Yahweh then answers: “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” (Ex 33:14).

Note that Moses is incapable of leading the people, even with angelic guidance without divine guidance and presence. He goes so far as to say, if you do not, do not take us from here, i.e., from the place where your presence is now and where we may live under your blessing. Israel’s distinction from all people consists in the divine presence which is the result of election and covenant, a consequence of obedience to the divine command, a condition of preservation and growth of Israel, a sign of Yahweh’s steadfast love.

In chapter 34 of Exodus in response to Moses’s request, Yahweh grants insight but not of his face but of his moral attributes – his goodness, mercy and grace. (34:6-9): “God reveals his moral attributes as that aspect of himself which is imitable. We cannot imitate his omnipotence or infinity, but his mercy, pity, etc. are imitable and our perfection lies in this. God’s merciful qualities are the most real link between God and man.”<sup>4</sup>

This is the supreme event of the Old Testament. It pre-shadows the revelation of God as Love. “The sense of the active presence of Yahweh with his people lies at the basis of the moral psychology of Israel. The command of God was not an abstraction, a most general principle, a law issued from someone above and beyond them. It was rather the word spoken by the divine Presence, a word which made this Presence real among them, a word whose observance created the conditions in which the divine presence would continue to dwell.”<sup>5</sup> The morality of presence conceives of commandments and their observance as creative, as causing the existence of Israel, both in their coming from the Lord as His words and in the collective obedience of the people.

The maintaining of God’s active presence gives to Hebrew morality an orientation that is quite different from Western ethics. The latter is what has been called a teleological ethics, i.e., moral acts are considered in terms of a state to be attained. “That is the goal of ethical action, that which the agent strives to make part of his life, is some quality such as happiness, well-being, virtue and so on.”<sup>6</sup> This formulation views moral life primarily as a striving, a search and as such places perfection of the one acting wholly in the future and this stresses the perfection of the one acting, of the moral agent. It is easy to see the inherent value in such a conception because it is open to progress and development and lends itself to exhortation. But there is a serious disadvantage to this view because it concentrates on the future and easily leads to disregarding the value of present reality. “It has a tendency to demean, in the strict sense of ‘making means of’ the present reality in the service of a future goal....It may de-emphasize the importance of loving union as the perfection of life, for such union is a doing rather than a quality.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Joseph Hertz, *Pentateuch and Haftorahs: Exodus*, (London, 1930), 338.

<sup>5</sup> Jonsen, 440.

<sup>6</sup> Jonsen, 442.

<sup>7</sup> Jonsen, 443.

Hebrew morality contrasts sharply with the Greek ethical view. The purpose of Hebrew morality is to preserve God's presence among his people, and it involves "an immediate personal sense of the active presence of God as [a] *sine qua non* of their very life as a people."<sup>8</sup> Present day Christian ethics has been heavily influenced by the moral psychology of the Greeks and has not sufficiently exploited the morality of presence as embodied particularly in Christ's words: "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our abode with him." (Jn 14:23).

### **Salesian Morality of Presence**

Although not completely free from the ethical striving and search for the good that is so characteristic of Greek ethics, Salesian spirituality stresses the morality of presence, the morality of union, in short, the morality of love. This is especially evident in St. Francis de Sales's treatment of the relationship of the virtue of charity in Book XI of the *Treatise on the Love of God*. It is the indwelling presence of God's Holy Spirit that accounts for the value, the goodness, the power of all our virtuous actions:

The Holy Spirit dwells in us if we are living members of Jesus Christ, who therefore said to his disciples: "He who abides in me, and I in him, he bears much fruit." [Jn 15:5]. Theotimus, this is because one who abides in him partakes of his divine Spirit, who is in the midst of man's heart as a living fountain springs up and flashes its waters unto life everlasting.<sup>9</sup>

The morality of presence looks more to the person commanding than to the command itself. The motivation for observing the command is not obedience to some external rule but the desire to please and be united to the one who commands. It places its major emphasis on love and not on obedience as the primary reason for its moral life. In a key passage of Book XI and of De Sales's whole conception of morality, this perspective is strongly emphasized:

Even though love is commanded and in loving we thus practice obedience, still love does not derive its perfection from obedience but from the goodness of him whom it loves. Love is not excellent because it is obedient but because it is love of an excellent good....Its perfection does not consist in the fact that when we love we are obedient, but rather in the fact that when we obey we love.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, De Sales does not want to disparage obedience, but rather to indicate the importance of love. He refers to this elsewhere as the "obedience of love":

Thus, too, conformity of our heart with that of God is brought about when by holy benevolence we cast all our affections into the hands of his divine will so that they

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<sup>8</sup> Jonsen, 443.

<sup>9</sup> Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, 2 vols, trans. J K Ryan (Stella Niagara, NY: De Sales Resources and Ministries, 2007). (Original work published in 1963), 2:211. Hereafter *Treatise*.

<sup>10</sup> *Treatise*, 2:222.

may be turned and directed as he chooses and shaped and formed according to his good pleasure. In this point, consists the most profound obedience of love, since it has no need to be roused up by threats or rewards, or by any law or any commandment.<sup>11</sup>

Nowhere is this morality of presence or union more evident in the words De Sales spoke to the Visitandines in his Conference on Simplicity and later became better known as the “Exercise of Spiritual Union.” He was very cognizant of the necessity of moral development, although he did not define the various stages as carefully as psychologists like Kohlberg and Piaget have done. We see his sensitivity to moral development in the advice he gave on the Spiritual Directory. He realized that at the beginning of the spiritual life it was advisable to keep minds and hearts occupied by a multiplicity of actions. But he concluded: “It is necessary that these exercises be united into one exercise of greater simplicity.” If in the beginning it might be necessary to insist on striving for perfection, this is not the goal. It was perhaps out of fear that the multiplicity of actions required by the Spiritual Directory might simply degenerate into a morality of striving instead of a morality of presence and of union that the first sisters of the Visitation petitioned St. Jane de Chantal to have the “Exercise of Union” added to the Spiritual Directory.<sup>12</sup>

In the *Introduction to a Devout Life*, our saint strongly underlines the importance of the practice of spiritual retirement linked inextricably with the frequent saying throughout the day of spiritual aspirations. In this way, we become frequently aware of God’s presence in our lives. “The awareness of God’s presence is the most important practice of devotion. It can make up for the lack of all other prayers. But to make good its absence, by another means is almost impossible. . . I ask you earnestly to take up this exercise with all your heart and never stop practicing it.”<sup>13</sup>

It is holy simplicity that keeps us riveted on God not only in our prayer life, but “in the conduct of our whole life.”<sup>14</sup> It makes us conduct ourselves like children in the presence of their parents:

Certainly, children whom Our Lord has told us should be our model of perfection are, generally speaking, quite free from care, especially in the presence of their parents. They cling to them without turning to consider their satisfaction or consolation.<sup>15</sup>

The whole concept of the morality of presence or union is beautifully expressed by De Sales in what is known as the Exercise of Spiritual Abandonment:

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<sup>11</sup> *Treatise*, 2:61.

<sup>12</sup> *Oeuvres de Saint François de Sales*, édition complète, 27 vols. (Annecy: J. Niérat et al., 1892-1964), 25:133. Hereafter *Oeuvres*.

<sup>13</sup> St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, trans. and ed. by Armin Nazareth, et al (Bangalore: S.F.S Publications, 1990), 86.

<sup>14</sup> *Oeuvres*, 6:217.

<sup>15</sup> Francis de Sales, *The Spiritual Conferences of St Francis de Sales*, trans. by A. Gasquet and B. Mackey (Westminster, MD.: Newman Bookshop, 1945), 227.

Spiritual lovers, spouses of the heavenly King, do indeed from time to time contemplate themselves upon brooks of waters in order to see if they are adorned so as to please their Beloved. This is done by examinations of conscience, by which they cleanse, purify, and beautify themselves as well as they can, not in order to be perfect, not to satisfy themselves, not from a desire to make progress in virtue, but out of obedience to the Bridegroom – out of the reverence they have for him, and the fervent desire which they have to please him. Now, is not that a love pure, simple, and unalloyed, since they do not adorn themselves in order to be beautiful, but only to please the Beloved? So much so that if ugliness were equally agreeable to him, they would love it as much as beauty.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Spiritual Conferences*, 228.