

'You shall have no other gods before me.' So begins that series of instructions to the people of Israel which we know as the Ten Commandments. At the beginning of a new academic year I thought I might begin ten reflections on the Ten Commandments and what I believe to be their absolute relevance to us today in the technologically advanced world of the 21st Century.

In my email box this morning is a message from a Christian publication telling me that the Church of England bishops in the House of Lords are being asked by the Government not to oppose the relaxation of the Sunday trading laws. This relates, of course, to the fourth commandment: 'Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy...' I shall reflect in more detail on this important commandment at a future date, but let me pause, for a moment, to wonder whether, as a society, we are already worshipping the god of the market?

Think about all those areas of our life that we now subject to market forces, as if these were the only force for good in establishing a just society. I exaggerate, of course, but the consumer society does hold the gods of profit and acquisition to be far more important than a number of other forces that might regulate our behaviour. In British society we now subject parts (more and more parts) of the health service to market forces. We apply that to the probation service, to the prison service, to many parts of education, including universities, to legal services, to transport, to the post office, to public service broadcasting, to social care.

Now I know that many will argue that it is perfectly justified to subject services of these kinds to market forces. Competition, we are told, improves performance, and ensures that the best choices are made, because people will always choose the best and most efficient. This may, in some cases, work. Take residential care, for example. I want to find the right home for my elderly relative. So I look at the homes available and make a judgement based on a balance of what I can afford and what provides the best care. A bit of careful research may well demonstrate those institutions that are truly dedicated to providing the best care at a reasonable cost. On the other hand there may be those that are providing the best return on investment for the owners and, in some cases, the shareholders. Difficulties arise, of course, where the profit motive limits true choice, because the only affordable homes are those where the standards of care are less than satisfactory. Profit does not guarantee quality. Regulation is always needed to sustain standards and, it has to be said, to maintain wage levels for staff at a rate that is a truly living wage. Some of our care workers, with care of people who are very vulnerable, are often amongst the lowest paid in our society. What does that say about the value we place on human life?

My brother Phil, who is a doctor in General Practice, has expressed to me more than once, recently, his distress at the sort of pressures a market driven health service places on our professionals and their desire to give a high standard of care. Two points to make here. Firstly, in General Practice nowadays you will find that a number of services have been placed in the care of the private sector, but only the ones which can make a profit for those companies that provide it, like immunisation. So the GP surgery finds that a service for which society pays a reasonable fee, like immunisation, and which everyone needs, is no longer included in its income. So in order to provide care a doctor is faced with a dilemma. If he or she is to spend time with patients as they need it they have to ask: 'Can I afford this time within my reduced budget?' The second point to make is that our professionals, and this included health and social services, as well as education, have now to show statistics to prove that they are providing 'value for money'. My brother says to me: 'But when I say, where, on this form, can I enter all the time I spend with Mrs X who is dying

and where can I record the quality of my experience and care as a GP, they say; “Oh, but we can’t measure that, so we can’t record it.””

The point is that we have, as a society, allowed our governments to pursue these false gods in the name of efficiency. You may say, perhaps, ‘So what has all this to do with that commandment you quoted, ‘You shall have no other gods before me’? That was written for a religious tribe in an primitive society in the Near East, some three thousand years ago.’ I would then answer: ‘But these commandments demonstrate a profound understanding of human nature, and the need we all have to be subject to laws in order to prevent us descending into chaos.’ The command to have no other god before the Lord is a command to prevent us holding, as the supreme authority, any god but the Lord who is covenanted in love with them. If we make a god of anything of our human making - be it an idol of stone, or a motive like profit, or the pursuit of pleasure, or the creation of wealth for its own sake - then we limit our capacity to live as human beings in society with each other. You don’t have to be an ancient Israelite to accept the validity of such a commandment. You don’t have to be religious at all to acknowledge that, when one idea becomes over-dominant, (be that capitalism, socialism, communism, or any other -ism), you risk tearing apart the fabric of a society that has taken generations to create. In the best regulated societies negotiation between all the different needs and demands is an absolute necessity. I believe that the Ten Commandments provide a framework for this negotiation that is as important for the non-religious as the religious.

‘You shall have no other gods before me’. I think we should be vigilant about those things that stem from the priorities of the god of the market. There are many, but two to watch out for are threats to the BBC and democratic control (such as it is) of big business through the TTIP. Firstly, the BBC is an institution that is not yet totally subject to the whims of the market, though there are many that would like it to be so. The present review may change that. The other is TTIP. What’s that? The Transatlantic Trade Investment Partnership is a secret series of bi-lateral trade agreements between the EU and the US seeking to bring down barriers of regulation that apparently prevent free trade. The catch is that arrangements are likely to favour trans-national business which is not subject to democratic control. For example, it could open up Europe’s health, education and water services to US companies, opening the door to control of such utilities by even more international corporations. But perhaps the most serious threat lies in plans to enable big business to sue governments for policies which cause a loss in profits. The god Profit again!

Perhaps you get my meaning? ‘You shall have no other gods before me.’ Irrelevant or not?

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