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To Veil or Not to Veil: Multiculturalism and the Bible

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Introduction

This paper is prompted by the changing demography of Britain. The UK like other parts of Europe has seen such a collapse in the birth rate in recent decades, that the only way to keep the economy running is to encourage mass immigration. This policy in itself is of questionable morality as it involves draining the poorest countries in the world of their best educated citizens, those who would have most to contribute to their own country's development, to prop up the lifestyle of the affluent West.¹

But it is not this aspect of immigration that I want to examine from a biblical perspective: it is rather what approach should be adopted to immigrant groups within the UK, once they have become established in European society. In the past when immigrants arrived in Britain, they usually came from basically Christian countries such as Ireland, Italy, Poland or even the West Indies. These foreign groups posed no challenge to the dominant British culture and gradually merged into British life. But in the last two decades, there have been many migrants from other parts of the world, whose lifestyle and religions as well as their colour more sharply differentiate them from the host community than previous immigrants from other parts of Europe.

Should these immigrants be allowed to retain their own traditions and identity, or should they, like earlier immigrants, be encouraged to identify with and merge with the host community? British policy for the last few decades has been firmly for the first option, multiculturalism, whereas French policy has been strongly for the second, integration. Thus in England schoolgirls are allowed to wear Islamic clothes to school, whereas in France they are banned. This is a trivial symptom of a fundamental principle. Obviously we cannot turn to Scripture to solve the issue of school uniform, but does it say anything that bears on the issue of how far immigrants should conform to biblical norms of religion and lifestyle?

However it is not just non-Christian immigrants who pose a problem. 70% of Britons profess to be Christian, but only 10% are regular churchgoers, so secularists dominate the media, education, and politics. And their war cry is of course that minority Christian values cannot dictate the morals of the majority. Thus we should not object to euthanasia or gay marriage for those who wish to live or die this way. This puts Christians in all walks of life on the defensive and makes them reluctant to push biblical principles in society.

These are the current issues that have triggered this paper. I hope to show that the Old Testament does not just set out laws that should apply only to Israel, but that it has a view on how all humans should behave and how far immigrants should conform to Israel's own legal code.² By extension we can relate Old Testament teaching to a society in which, although the large majority profess to be Christians, only a small minority actually appear to practise their faith actively.

The Ethics of Genesis 1 - 11

The opening chapters of Genesis are of the utmost importance for our discussion for they are universal in their perspective: they are telling the story of all humanity, not just the descendants of Abraham, the chosen people. Adam, and for that matter Noah too, are presented as the fathers of all mankind, so their experiences are decisive for the whole human race, not just for the Jews or for the Church. This approach

is endorsed by both Jesus and Paul, who appeal to them to establish Christian doctrines of marriage (Matthew 19: 3 – 12), sin and the fall (Romans 5) among other issues.

Genesis 1 sets out clearly man's place in the created order.³ His creation is clearly the high point of the six-day process. On day 6 when man is created in God's image, God pronounces his work not just 'good' as on the preceding days, but 'very good'. It is as if the narrator were saying: man was not made for the world, but the world was made for man.

But the concept of the divine image in man rules out the idea that mankind is licensed to exploit the earth ruthlessly. The idea of the image of God is borrowed from royal ideology: neighbours of ancient Israel held that their kings were in the image of God, that is, kings were the representatives of God on earth. Genesis democratises this notion by stating that every human being is in God's image and represents him to the rest of creation. But every king is supposed to manage his subjects for their own good not for his private benefit (see Psalm 72). So here Genesis is implying that all mankind has a duty of care towards the rest of creation. We must act as God's representatives in managing the earth.

But how is man to fulfil this divine mandate? Genesis 1:27 tells us: 'In the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.' It goes on to tell of the first command given to the human race, 'Be fruitful and multiply'. For Genesis 1 the differentiation between the sexes is fundamental, and its purpose is clear, procreation. Genesis 2 reinforces this message in the story of Eve's creation. God doubtless could have cloned another Adam out of Adam's rib, but he chose to make just one Eve, not several Eves. Between them these opening chapters of Genesis make clear that God's design for all mankind is heterosexual monogamy. But it is not childless monogamy: his command is 'be fruitful and multiply' - a principle often ignored by the self-centred West.

Genesis 1: 29-30 sets out another universal principle, which the affluent West tends to overlook. In the pre-fall world man and beast were vegetarian: 'And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant ... for food".' But it is not just vegetarianism that characterised the original creation, but lack of violence. The lion did not eat the lamb, and man did not kill his brother man or the animals. All lived in perfect harmony. The prophets look forward to a day when this state of affairs will be restored (Isaiah 11: 6-7).

Though absolute vegetarianism is rescinded after the flood, ancient Israel ate very little meat. Domestic

animals were too valuable to kill normally, and the food laws of Leviticus limited the types of game that could be hunted for food. Israelites would have been shocked at the amount of meat we consume, its methods of production, and by the amount of grain used to produce it.⁴

The vegetarianism of Genesis 1 is one aspect of the universal harmony and peace that it describes. Another is the Sabbath. Though the climax of the creation story is the creation of human beings, its goal is rest on the Sabbath (Genesis 2: 2 – 3). Genesis implies that as God rested on the seventh day so should man, a point made explicitly in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20: 8 – 11).

Genesis 1 therefore sets out quite clearly a divine blueprint for the ideal human society. It is a society, where man as God's representative manages the rest of creation benevolently. It is a society which values heterosexual marriage and children. It is a society characterised by non-violence, where man is at peace with his fellow man and with the animals. Finally, it is a society which rests on the seventh day.

The story of the fall in Genesis 2 – 3 reinforces these points. But the fall also changes things. It introduces violence between man and beast, and between individual human beings (Genesis 3: 15; 4: 1 – 24). Indeed animal and human violence trigger the flood. The flood reverses creation: the earth returns to the situation described in 1: 2. As the water falls, a new creation occurs: the land and the trees appear, the birds start flying over it, the animals and man walk on dry land, and Noah is told like Adam before him 'Be fruitful and multiply'.⁵

However the root problem is still there: the sinfulness of the human heart. Compare Genesis 6:5-7 with Genesis 8: 21. Clearly the sacrifices offered by Noah have changed God's attitude to man's sinfulness, but what is to stop violence breaking out again and filling the earth?

Law as a Compromise

This issue is directly addressed in Genesis 9. Laws on food and homicide are introduced that show God compromising with his ideals to accommodate the fact of sin. Originally (Genesis 1: 29 – 30) vegetarianism was the norm: now God permits limited meat eating, as long as the blood is not consumed (9: 3 – 4). To curb violence God institutes the death penalty for homicide.

There is an inherent paradox in exacting the death penalty. It is required because man is made in God's image, so that an assault on a human is also an implied

attack on God. In this case then surely the murderer should not be put to death. However if the survival of the human race is at stake, which is what the flood story teaches is the effect of unrestrained violence, then it is necessary, though regrettable, to execute the murderer (9: 6).

This illustrates a point about many penal laws in the Bible: they do not set out the ideals of behaviour, rather they set limits for conduct, which if transgressed must be punished. For example, Deuteronomy 6: 5 insists that 'you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.' No penalties are prescribed if you love God half-heartedly, but if your brother starts to encourage you to worship other gods, 'you shall kill him' (Deuteronomy 13: 9). Likewise 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' is the ultimate goal of interpersonal relationships, but a lukewarm affection is not punished. The law starts to operate when lack of love turns to theft, adultery, or murder. In other words the law sets a floor for behaviour in society: it does not define the ethical ceiling to which all should aspire.

Jesus endorses this principle in his debate with the Pharisees about divorce ⁶ (Matthew 19: 4 – 6). That Moses allowed divorce does not mean God approves it, only that he tolerates it. Many of the regulations in the law must be taken the same way. Laws on bigamy, warfare, slavery, mortgaging land and property, pledges, money lending and so on do not mean that the situations that give rise to these issues are inherently good or that the solutions proposed in the law are ideal. In a sinless world these problems would not arise. The laws could be said to make the best of a bad situation.

The ethical principles enunciated in Genesis 1- 9 are clearly regarded as applicable to the whole human race. According to Genesis everyone is a descendant of Noah and Adam before him. The notion that law stops society degenerating into violence applies just as much to the laws addressed to Israel in Exodus to Deuteronomy as to the universal principles of Genesis 1 – 11. But can the principles of Israel's law be appropriated by Christian nations? Christopher Wright has made the case that Old Testament law should be used as a paradigm by other societies. It illustrates the values that society should promote particularly in its relationship to God, to the land, and to family life. Some of the rules, e.g. about gleaning fields, are quite irrelevant in high-tech agriculture, but they point to a concern for the poor that every society ought to make a priority.

But it is all very well to assert that the Old Testament law is paradigmatic, but how do we transpose its ideas into Western multicultural society? Of course some

principles are transparently as relevant today as ever they were. The Old Testament insists on evidence being well corroborated and punishes perjury severely (Deuteronomy 19:15-19). But this is where I believe that the idea of the law being a compromise between the ethical ideals of the Old Testament and the free-for-all situation that prevailed before the flood can help us. Every society recognises the gap between the ideal behaviour that every citizen should live by and the laws which punish those who fall too far short of these ideals. The Old Testament tells us both what its ideals are and what its minimum requirements are.

Christians need to keep the biblical ideals in mind, so that legislation, which is of necessity a pragmatic compromise, does not get too out of kilter with God's purposes. So we need to clarify what moral principles are indeed universal and apply not just to Israel but to all mankind. A strong case has been made for seeing the Ten Commandments as being universally applicable.⁷ However the opening chapters of Genesis also set out a vision of how man ought to live: fertile monogamous marriage, protection of human life, benevolent human management of the rest of creation, a preference for vegetarianism, and the observance of the Sabbath. These overlap the Ten Commandments. In that these principles are depicted as applying to the whole human race, we should not feel inhibited in pressing them on multicultural societies in any nation.

Laws on Immigrants

But ancient Israel was also a multicultural society with immigrants, 'sojourners' from neighbouring lands. Did Israel expect them to observe the whole law or just these universal principles? Two concerns seem to run through Old Testament legislation for immigrants. On the one hand their vulnerability must not be taken advantage of by native Israelites (Leviticus 19: 33-34). On the other these sojourners were not expected to conform in every respect to Israel's laws and customs: only some laws are explicitly said to apply to them as well as native Israelites.

In this spirit of welcome, the sojourner was allowed to offer sacrifice and participate in the major festivals (Leviticus 22: 18; Numbers 15: 15 – 27; Deuteronomy 16: 11, 14) (the Passover only if he is circumcised [Exodus 12: 49]). The only specifically Israelite religious rules immigrants must observe are no leaven at Passover, no working on the Day of Atonement, and no sacrificing of children to Moloch (Exodus 12: 19; Leviticus 16: 29; 20: 2). But they must observe the rules that reflect God's intentions for all humanity that we have noted in Genesis 1 – 9.

Sojourners must adhere to the creation principles of

sexuality. The prohibitions of incest, adultery, homosexuality, and bestiality apply to sojourners as well as native Israelites (Leviticus 18: 26). Sojourners are subject to the laws on homicide: to the death penalty if guilty, but they may also flee to the cities of refuge in cases of accidental killing (Leviticus 24: 22; Numbers 35: 15). They must also refrain from consuming blood, which reflects the pro-vegetarian ideal (Leviticus 17: 10, 13; cf. Genesis 9: 4). Finally, they must observe the Sabbath (Exodus 20: 10; 23: 12; Deuteronomy 5: 14). The inclusion of this rule in the Ten Commandments highlights its importance.⁸

Conclusion

I suggest that the law for ancient Israel gives us a model to imitate today. We should work for legislation in society that reflects the Bible's ideals about sexuality, the sanctity of life, the environment, the Sabbath and the protection of immigrants. Like Moses of ancient Israel, we shall be forced to make compromises because of the hardness of the human heart, but we should not abandon the vision of Genesis 1 and 2. These patterns of human life, whether it be marriage or the Sabbath, the sanctity of life or the protection of the environment, are still attractive today, whatever modern libertarians assert, and we should not give up commending them boldly.

End Notes

1. See Meic Pearse, *Why the Rest Hate the West* (London: SPCK, 2003). On present trends the indigenous population of Europe will fall by nearly three-quarters by the end of the century. This is causing the pensions crisis, lack of carers for the elderly in the West, and emptying the hospitals of nurses in the developing world.
2. For a fuller version of this argument see G. J. Wenham, 'Biblical Ethics in a Multicultural Society', in *Tales of Two Cities* (ed. S. Clark) (Leicester: IVP, 2005), 13 – 43.
3. See G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1 – 15* (Waco: Word Books, 1987).
4. Compassion in World Farming exposes the cruelty of much of today's livestock industry. It takes about 10 tons of corn to produce 1 ton of beef. The need for pasture drives deforestation and the cattle also produce the greenhouse gas methane.
5. Not once as Adam but three times (Genesis 8: 17; 9: 1, 7).
6. For a fuller discussion of this episode see G. J. Wenham, 'Does the New Testament Approve Remarriage after Divorce?' *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 6 (2002), 30 – 45; and *Remarriage after Divorce in Today's Church: Three Views*, ed. M. L. Strauss (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 19 – 42.
7. e.g. P. G. Kuntz, *The Ten Commandments: Mosaic Paradigms for a Well-Ordered Society* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2004).

For further reading

- G. J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading the Old Testament Ethically* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000).
- C. J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Leicester: Apollos, 2004).

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