

"The Ten Commandments and their place in public and sacred life"

By Dr. Shahid Athar

God created Adam and sent him to Earth to be His vicergant. In His infinite mercy, He designed some laws for mankind by which Adam was to conduct himself on this planet. They were later revealed to the prophet Moses as the Ten Commandments, which are mentioned in euteronomy 5:6-21. They were the first written law for mankind. Quran confirms what was revealed to Moses in the Ten Commandments and asks Muslims to believe in the revelations given to prophets before Mohammed.

The Ten Commandments continued to be the moral foundation of human civilization and the roots of a civil society in public and private life. I am sure our founding fathers had them in their minds when our constitution was being written.

By adopting elements of the Ten Commandments in our constitution in 1776, they intended to endorse a moral code, not just Christianity, though defacto the country at that time was a Christian society, not a melting pot or a pluralistic society as we have now. James Madison, fourth president of the United States and member of the Congress that ratified the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights, put this quite clearly:

"We have all staked the future of this nation upon the capacity of each and all to govern ourselves, to sustain ourselves, according to the Ten Commandments..."

There are commonalities between secular moral values and religious moral values, such as telling the truth and being honest etc..

However, the main difference between the divine law versus the human law is the difference between the accountability and flexibility. Human laws keep changing from time to time and are meant to serve human beings at a given place and time.

Accountability is with the law enforcement agencies only. However, in the process of divine law, the accountability is to the self, who is accountable to the creator. The divine laws are eternal and not changeable because of concenses in the public opinion. For example, the divine law will not change if the majority adopts adultery as a way of life and as an acceptable norm in the society. In addition, in the enforcement of divine law, the emphasis is more on repentance, forgiveness and reform, while in the human law, the emphasis is on finding the criminal and punishing him or her. Since the Ten Commandments are from God, we Muslims have no objections to them in their application or display by an individual, organization or even the Government.

However, the debate is what is the role of a government which calls itself secular in terms of promoting religious/moral values? How can a government encourage the good and forbid the wrong to ensure peace and harmony and create a civil society without endorsing one religion? In Islam, all actions are to be judged according to the intention of the doer. Therefore, is the intention of the state in displaying the Ten Commandments in the Capitol building to promote moral law or to endorse one religion over the other? Minority religions, including secularism feel that displaying the scripture of one religion by the government, endorses only that religion, and eliminates to some degree, their participation in the affairs of the government. It is the minority which needs protection. The majority can protect itself. We need to ask ourselves and our state officials if we consider the United States of America only a Christian country or a country made of 14 different religious groups which were gathered at the Parliament of World Religions held in Chicago a few years ago. To me the Jeudo-Christian American society is slowly but surely changing to a Jeudo-Christian-Islamic-Hindu-Budhist and other society. Thus, if the purpose of having a display of the Ten Commandments on government property, paid for by our tax dollars is to endorse and promote one religion only, then I am opposed to it.

What are the other alternative solutions? Why cannot our government, with its newfound moral/family values promote them without mentioning the religion? With the same good intention, why can't we take away the display of violence and sex on television, which is more harmful to our society than the lack of knowledge of the Ten Commandments? I propose that we should do one of two things, if done by our government to be paid for by our tax dollars:

A. We include the scriptures of other religions at the same place where we display the Ten Commandments, to support the dream that the USA belongs to all of us. However, I feel that Christian right will object to other religions being endorsed by the government.

B. The second proposal is that instead of displaying the Ten Commandments, we come up with ten common rules of morality as a basis for a civil society, chosen from the Ten Commandments and other such injunctions from other religions, without mentioning or naming a religion, and display them as a state supported moral code.

Such rules may include:

Respecting people of other faith, mutual tolerance, condemning racism or even saying "Say no to drugs".