

# American Decency Association

PO Box 202, Fremont, MI 49412 231-924-4050 www.americandecency.org

Encouraging Christians to guard their hearts

September 2010

## Is Morality Necessary for Society?



Perhaps the simplest way to see the role the moral world has played is to think about some of the dilemmas our Western societies now face. Lord Moulton, an English jurist of the last century, proposed that for any society to be healthy and productive three domains had to be preserved: the domain of law, the domain of freedom, and the internal domain of “obedience to the unenforceable.” Two of these domains are rather obvious.

Every society needs law as well as the machinery to enforce it, from police to courts to prisons. This is because every society includes those who rob, rape, steal, and in a multitude of the other ways do harm to their fellow human beings. This machinery may cure no one, but it discourages antisocial action and protects those who might otherwise become prey to various kinds of predators.

Equally important is a second domain. It is the preservation of freedom, It is in the soil of freedom that invention, creativity, entrepreneurial work, philanthropy and Christian believing all grow. Both law and freedom have to be preserved.

Lying between law and freedom is the domain of “obedience to the unenforceable.” This is where restraint is self-imposed from the outside. It is where moral imperatives flourish, not because the law demands that they do, nor even that this is what others expect, but simply because they are seen to be right.

Many things are unethical but not illegal. Many acts of unkindness, many of the destructive rumors we are constantly hearing, character assassination, acts of thoughtlessness, crude behavior, pornography, and homosexuality are unethical, but most are not illegal. In these and many other areas restraint should come from within, and very often the law is simply incapable of making illegal the offensive

behavior. How could we pass laws against cutting remarks or demeaning and rude gestures?

Our society’s law is both negative and positive. In prohibiting certain behavior, it is also requiring the opposite. It is illegal to cheat on one’s taxes, so, by the same token, the law commands citizens to be honest in paying their taxes. However, law cannot command many things that are highly desirable to life. It cannot command us to be compassionate or benevolent, to care for each other, to be gentle, or to live out any of the other virtues. It can command only that we do not kill, defraud, or assault others.

The virtues cannot be matters of government policy, or of the law’s requirement in any country. Similarly, it is we who have to restrain our own vices, many of which are not illegal. Gambling, for example, is regulated by the state, but we need to have the self-discipline to avoid it entirely by staying away from casinos and online betting.

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free of any inward restraint. What is the answer?

The only answer we have been able to find is litigation, litigation in place of morality. It is litigation or the fear of litigation, that must restrain the expression of inward vices and all self-serving behavior. To be successful, though, laws must be greatly multiplied to cover every situation where morality once ruled.

From whence, then, comes this moral directive, this inward discipline, that produces this “obedience to the unenforceable,” obedience to what our law, civil or criminal, often cannot require of its citizens? It comes from the moral world that citizens inhabit in their own minds and souls. What happens when that world disappears?

What happens is this. Freedom, cut loose from all inward, moral restraint, degenerates. It is reduced to meaning nothing more than that as free people we can do, say, or see anything we want, provided it is not illegal. We are free to do what we want all the way up to the line of illegality because once the moral world has disappeared, the only restraint that remains is a country’s laws. This, though, is a recipe for social strife because people playing fast and loose, but living just within the boundaries of the law, create enormous damage. Our social life cannot survive so many people who are so

This, in a mild form, is also what political correctness seeks to do by creating rules that are a substitute for morality. These are then backed by social punishment for offenders of those rules. The illustrations of this dynamic are almost endless. As our moral world has died, freedom from the one side and law from the other have both rushed in to occupy the middle territory of “obedience to the unenforceable.” And the options have now dwindled down to an aggressive legalism on the one side or a rampant, libertarian individualism on the other.

[Taken from “The Courage to be Protestant” by David F. Wells William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company Grand Rapids, MI/ Cambridge, U.K.]

**Personal note by:  
Chris Johnson**

The founders agreed that morality, what David Wells calls “obedience to the unenforceable,” was a vital part of maintaining a healthy society.

Consider the words of George Washington in his Farewell Address: *“Of all the dispositions and habits, which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports... Let it simply be asked, where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths...?”*

Johns Adams said something very similar: *“Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.”*

There is plenty of attention paid to politics these days, but Washington is only part of the problem. What we really need is to start putting more focus on following God’s laws, on “our obedience to the unenforceable.”



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