

Would following Jesus mean the end of my freedom?

There are few things we value more as a society, or as individuals, than freedom. Just last night [26/10/2005] the House of Commons has been debating the government's Terror Bill, with its controversial proposal to be able to lock up British citizens for up to 3 months without bringing charges against them. The whole debate over this provision has centred around whether it is legitimate to sacrifice the freedom of citizens for the equivalent of a 6 month prison sentence on the one hand, versus whether this move is necessary to prevent terrorist attacks and, hence, the freedom of other citizens.

At a more individual level to you guys a large part of the marketing that goes on in the alcohol sodden blur that is Fresher's week is about freedom. Freedom to have a proper bank account. Freedom to leave home, for any of the first time. Freedom to have classes you choose not to turn up to. In general, as the song puts it, free to do whatever I like, wherever I please, anytime at all.

Freedom is a great driving force in our culture. It governs all sorts of things. Freedom is everything – from the reason for fighting a war in Iraq (at least according to George Bush and Tony Blair) to the reason for breaking up with your girlfriend – if you love somebody, set them free. Freedom is considered a great good in the early C21st. In fact it would be fair to say that for many freedom is a god. And in our society freedom is unavoidably related to individualism.

The kind of liberties we are concerned to protect are the freedoms to do the things we want to do. Our culture tells us that that almost the only duty we have is to be true to ourselves. To be an authentic individual. To discover who we are inside. What that means, in practice, is that who we are as people is something that we decide for ourselves. It is something inside us. Who we are as people is not something that is imposed on us from the outside. The core of our being is not defined by our parents, our schooling, our university course, our friends or even by God. Who we are is something we choose for ourselves.

For most of us that is a cultural norm, a default starting point for thinking about ourselves. It's something we don't normally even question. But it's also something that has many important consequences.

And this evening we're going to look at just one of those consequences. And it's this: If the freedom to do whatever I like is vital to who I am, then the existence of God seems to be a threat to my very identity as a person.

That's really the idea encapsulated in our title for this evening isn't it? If my whole personal identity is bound up with having the freedom to make entirely my own decisions doesn't the existence of a God who tells me that certain things are right and wrong threaten my very identity? Is it not essential to being human that I am a free man or woman able to make my own decisions?

Doesn't the existence of God mean I will end up some cringing, desperate slave having to constantly inflict mental punishment on myself for my unworthiness? Or doesn't it, at the very least, mean I will have to give up some of the very pleasures that are most important to me as a person?

Well I want to suggest to you this evening that following Jesus Christ does not mean the end of your freedom. And I want to outline for you this evening several reasons why I think that is the case. There will be a chance for you to ask questions at the end so please do come back to me on anything you disagree with or would like to know more about.

1 Rejecting God cannot bring freedom

Throughout the last 150 years or so many philosophers and other thinkers have explicitly stated that they prefer a universe that does not require God to explain it because they believe that the existence or idea of God a threat to their freedom. The atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell put it like this:

"We want to stand upon our own feet and look fair and square at the world...see the world as it is and be not afraid of it. The whole conception of God is a... conception quite unworthy of free men. When you hear people in church debasing themselves and saying they are unworthy sinners it seems contemptible."

Some writers are, perhaps, more honest about the specific ways in which God might interfere with their preferences. The atheist writer Aldous Huxley, author of the Brilliant book Brave New World, which some of you no doubt have read put it like this:

"I had motives for not wanting the world to have meaning – and consequently assumed it had none. For myself the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially a philosophy of liberation... from a certain system of morality. We objected to the morality because it interfered with our sexual freedom."

Put in less philosophical language – if what the Bible said about God was true it meant I couldn't sleep with who I liked. So I had an excellent motivation to not believe in the God of the Bible.

But these ideas aren't confined to ivory tower academics from 50 or more years ago. Two of the best selling sets of books of our time are based on precisely the idea that the existence of God is a massive threat to human freedom.

Firstly the, sadly, best-selling, Da Vinci Code by Dan Brown. As a friend of mine remarked it seems astonishing that any book that opens with an albino-monk-assassin should be taken seriously by anyone! But an astonishing number of people have taken seriously his accusation that the Bible has completely changed the story of Jesus life in order to suppress and deny freedom to women.

Secondly, a much better book! Philip Pullman's brilliant "Dark Materials" trilogy. The whole plot of these books moves towards an attempt by the heroes of the story to wage all out war against God and his armies (the church) and to kill God. That is the only way, in Pullman's view, that humanity can be given genuine freedom.

You may think "well, it's just a story" but Pullman is clear that the story really does reflect what he thinks about the world. In a recent interview he attacked plans to make C S Lewis' Narnia books into movies on the basis that they were "racist" and anti-women. Now of course those books do reflect the attitudes of half-a-century ago when they were written but I don't imagine Pullman would oppose making the movie "Pride and Prejudice" on the grounds that Jane Austen was a bit of a class snob or that he would picket an RSC production of The Merchant of Venice because Shakespeare was anti-semitic! Philip Pullman has an agenda – to demonstrate that believing in God must mean the end of freedom.

But the reality is that it is not Christianity but atheism – the rejection of God that threatens our freedom. There are many people in our society who proudly proclaim that they do not want to believe the doctrine or, as they would probably call it, dogma, of the Christian faith.

But it's astonishing to me how many of those people still want to shelter under the umbrella of Christian morality. I've met loads of people who want us to retain Jesus' ethical commands about not stealing, not hating and not killing (though they're often a bit more ambiguous about not lusting I find!) but reject the things that Jesus said about who he was.

Then again I meet people who want to claim to be moral relativists – they recognise that if there is no God there can be no ultimate law giver. But even with those people once you probe I find they are still trying to shelter under Christian morality. They do not think it's OK for the Ku Klux Klan to burn down black churches or for Hitler to exterminate 6 million Jews or for public officials to take bribes.

There are very few people who are prepared to accept the logical conclusion of rejecting God. If there is no God then there is no basis for morality. One of the few people who thought his atheism through to its logical conclusion was the German philosopher Frederich Nietzsche. He said this:

"When one gives up the Christian faith one pulls the right to Christian morality from underneath ones feet."

Nietzsche was an advocate of society's strong and able people eliminating the weak and vulnerable so as to create a race of supermen. No wonder he was Hitler's favourite philosopher. To reject God is to reject any ultimate basis for morality. And that means that if someone decides to do something that impinges on your freedom – like kill you or steal your girlfriend – there is no reason to say that is wrong. A world without God cannot be a free world. It can only be a world where brutal competition and elimination reigns.

As the great Italian thinker Joseph Mazzini said:

"If there be not a supreme mind reigning over all human minds, who can save us from the tyranny of our fellow men whenever they find themselves stronger than we? If there be not a holy and inviolable law not created by men what rules have we to judge whether an act be just or unjust?"

There can be no true morality without God. So a society without God will not be free.

2 Rejecting God does not bring freedom

A close look at the history of the world's atheist states over the last 100 years only serves to demonstrate that this is true. The two great world wars were responsible for the deaths of some 70 million people. But outside of those wars the communist states, especially China and the Soviet Union, killed 100 million people in internal suppression. And that was not an accident! The first Soviet leader Lenin had this to say about right and wrong: *"We do not believe in everlasting morality, and we denounce all this lying rubbish about it."*

And that was not just the view of a few top dogs in the system. Richard Wurmbrandt was a Christian pastor in Romania during the communist years. He was imprisoned and tortured for his rejection of communism, both as a philosophy and as a political system. When he testified in front of the US Senate he showed them the 18 deep scars he still bore as a result of that torture. He saw, first hand, not only the knives of the torturers, but also their world view. And what he heard was that the communist torturers often said *"There is no God, no punishment for evil. We can do what we wish."*

Now of course that is not to say that every atheist is an unpleasant person. Or that they are evil. My Dad is an atheist. He's very nice. He has extremely high moral standards in my view. But that is because he is, thankfully, an inconsistent atheist. Ultimately he has no foundation for the morals that he holds – he has stolen them from Christians – whose God he rejects.

At an individual level too I think it would be fair to say that experience testifies that rejecting God does not bring freedom. British society exhibits at every level the misery caused by turning away from God and setting ourselves up as the only arbiters of right and wrong.

- ✚ The misery of credit card debt.
- ✚ The heartache of divorce.
- ✚ The mental and physical damage of serial monogamy.
- ✚ The loneliness and alienation of our cities and towns.

All of these, and many more, are symptoms of the tyranny of doing what we want. But, you might say to me, surely over the years many people have done wicked things in the name of God? After all it's not only communists who have had people murdered – what about the Inquisition? What about the crusades?

Well what I'd want to say about that is that:

3 The abuses of "Christians" only prove the Bible is right.

There is a fundamental difference between someone who claims to be a Christian and has his opponents killed and someone who is an atheist and has his opponents killed. And the difference is that the person who is claiming to be a Christian is being a hypocrite.

For the atheist using any means to establish power and control is entirely consistent with their philosophy of life. For the atheist there is no reason to believe that human beings ultimately matter at all. So the only freedom worth protecting is your own. For the Christian any act of unnecessary violence, any abuse of the freedoms of other people is to go in direct contradiction to what Jesus Christ himself said.

I confess before you tonight that in the name of Christ people have done very many wicked and terrible things. Many of those people were not Christians at all – they were using the name of Jesus as a cover for their own self-centredness.

But there are also many genuine Christian believers who have done wicked things. The great reformer Martin Luther was a terrible anti-Semite. English revolutionary Oliver Cromwell was responsible for awful killings in Ireland. Maybe some Christian you know has let you down or hurt you in some way.

But that shouldn't surprise anyone who knows what Christians believe. Because what Christians believe is that all human beings are self-centred by nature and in rebellion against God.

And Christians are people who have been delivered from that self-centredness. They are simply people who have recognised that only God can forgive that self-centredness through Jesus Christ and have renounced it, though we are all still haunted by it.

In that sense the abuses of the freedom of others by Christians simply goes to prove that the Bible is right – human beings really are wicked and in need of God's forgiveness and mercy.

The difference is that whereas for the atheist there is no reason in his philosophy not to be self-centred the heart of the Christian message is about turning away from self-centredness and wrongdoing.

And the Christian gospel, the good news, is that there is such a thing as true freedom...

4 Jesus sets us free by becoming the centre of our identity.

As I said at the beginning one of the main reasons so many people are afraid that becoming a Christian will mean the end of their freedom is because we imagine that to be truly free we have to be able to define our own identity – and that means making our own choices, no matter how irrational our decisions may be.

But Jesus tells us that the choice human beings face is not between utter freedom and following him. Listen to these words of Jesus as recorded by one of his closest earthly friends, John:

"I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free you will be free indeed."

Human beings are creatures. It is in our very nature, Jesus says, to follow something or someone. So the choice is not between freedom and Jesus. The choice is between being slaves to sin and being sons and daughters of God, set free by THE Son of God.

I guess in a gathering like this there will be some people who, if you are honest with yourself, will feel your slavery to sin. You might put on a good show with your mates about how wonderful it is to live a totally hedonistic student life but inside you know that all you are doing is serving your basest appetites and that you have become enslaved to your own desires.

I'm sure there are other people who don't feel that you are a slave to sin. Just like there are many drug addicts who would tell you that they don't have a problem.

Perhaps you don't feel chained to the most basic instincts of gut and groin. But if you are living with yourself, rather than God, at the centre of the universe, you ARE living the life of a slave, whether you feel like it or not. Because you are living a lie.

The reality is that God is at the centre of the universe, whether you choose to live like it or not. The Christian contention is human beings were created to know God and be in relationship with him. That is the essence of

who we are. That should be the centre of our identity.

To acknowledge God as the king of our lives and to acknowledge his word and his standards as the right way to live is not to abandon your freedom. Not at all. Because you were not created to be free from God. You were created to be in a relationship with the God who perfectly understands and loves you.

God's vision for those who follow Jesus and put their trust in him is not to impose a set of rules from the outside. Despite the impression that Christians can sometimes give what God does is not come along with a big list of dos and don'ts and a large stick to beat people with if we don't obey. Rather what God promises to those who trust in Jesus is to so transform your heart and mind that you want what God wants. That's not brainwashing by God – it is re-creation. It is God making us the people that we ought to be.

This is how God put it before Jesus came when he was making promises about what he would do for those who trust him:

"I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."
Ezekiel 36:25-27

If you are looking in on the lives of Christians from the outside it does look like they have given up some freedoms. Because Christians, generally, don't behave in the way that most people in our society do. But that is not because God is standing over us with a baseball bat threatening us if we step out of line. It is because Christians have become convinced that God's way is a better way to live. It is because Christians are people who have discovered that we cannot truly understand who we are without God being at the centre of our lives.

Being a Christian does not mean the end of your freedom. As a society it is only the Christian conviction that there is a God and that his law is supreme that will protect us from imposing our views on one another by violence. As individuals it is only being in relationship with the God who made us that sets us free from slavery to our own desires.

Paul Helm: *"the provision of...grace, far from making a person into a puppet, actually frees him, making a puppet into a person."*

Andrew Evans
February 2006