

## Future View

# Updating the Ten Commandments

*The Ten Commandments may need a modern, secular facelift*

*Joseph Coates*

“Decalogue” is another word for the Ten Commandments, but it is also defined as a guide to ethical behavior. In my opinion, society needs an updated version of the original Decalogue that would be more secular.

Two facts support this call for a new, secular decalogue. First, a large and growing percentage of people are either no longer adherent to or practitioners of traditional religions; thus, they lack a concrete ideological base to guide them through ethical situations. Second, the moral precepts of the Ten Commandments are inadequate for dealing with many of the ethically and morally loaded situations we face today.

A new decalogue would certainly not replace the 10 ancient mandates, but it could meet the needs of those outside traditional religious communities. It could also guide any person toward a better understanding of the unprecedented issues unfolding before us.

**1. Realize that our own actions or failures to act will determine our future.** People alone are in charge of this world. No hypothetical or imagined powers, including devils and gods, can share responsibility with us.

**2. Honor future generations’ rights, obligations, and needs.** Be sure that there are not so many descendants as to exceed the ability of the world to meet their needs. Leave DNA samples and full health records of yourself and family. Encourage discussion, write essays, and promote media presentations of what future legal and constitutional rights may be, such as rights to privacy, silence, leisure, and education. And work to maintain as many species and habitats as practical.

**3. Recognize our societal and genetic histories and work to mend their flaws.** Rather than passively deplore the flaws in our social history, such as slavery, we should

strive to fix whatever negative repercussions still linger. Rather than celebrate genetic defects, such as deafness, we should accept these conditions as flaws and work hard to eliminate, correct, or improve them. Making the best of a bad situation is desirable, but to glamorize it is foolish.

**4. Do not destroy; only improve.** The good, the useful, and the beautiful are centerpieces of our world. Everything can have one, two, or all three of those characteristics, and we should work to make sure everything does.

**5. Expand our knowledge and develop our understanding of all things.** To broaden our understanding of the world, we must look, listen, touch, smell, feel, and taste more. We must learn about the environment, war, and peace, and we must encourage others to learn about similar things so that we can cooperate to build a better future. Being well rounded in these regards means we will be less likely to operate on ignorance or prejudice and more likely to accept alternative outlooks and lifestyles. By continually expanding our knowledge of all things, we can do our part to foster a world of understanding and cooperation rather than one of hostility and war.

Few if any problems, such as the future energy supply, global warming, youth pregnancies, or obesity, can be eliminated by a magic bullet. If we do not understand a complex issue, we are likely to be captivated by the simpleminded remedy of the ideologue, the crowd-pleasing politician, or the earnestly strident pleader.

**6. Covet only what we have earned as a reward for use of our mental and/or physical abilities.** In today’s world, people can earn unimaginably large amounts of money, as the new multi-billionaires have shown. But excess wealth breeds jealousy and greed. Therefore, we must seek and expect wealth only in proportion to what we have truly earned.

**7. Honor all routes to the truth, but never specious beliefs in infallibility.** Truth comes from systematic exploration, not from pontification, abstract claims of direct knowledge or infallibility, or from one's immediate and usually too limited personal experience. All children should be introduced to systems thinking in school, starting with human physiology, at the expense of mere facts and oversimplified accounts of complex material. Systems thinking should be the core of twenty-first-century education.

Children are natural truth seekers with their endless questions of how and why. But by some failure-at home, at school, or via media outlets-simple canned information has become a bane to their intellectual diets. Our world will hardly be safe in the hands of adults who mistake slogans for knowledge and labels for understanding.

**8. Be moderate in all things.** This imperative already widely acknowledged in terms of health and personal well-being-should be expanded to our attitudes, behaviors, and actions.

Moderation is the antidote to impetuosity, rashness, recklessness, and the destructive single-mindedness of assault, murder, and collective violence. By being more moderate in behavior, we could inch toward a future peaceable kingdom.

**9. Recognize our limitations as individuals and as societies.** In a democratic society, we must all recognize our own and each other's capabilities and limitations in terms of our knowledge and the actions we might be able to take together to further our shared principles. These limitations do not and must not negate our rights or relieve us of responsibility. All this implies an experimental approach to governance-and frequent review of the effects of laws and regulations.

Imagine a plan to restructure Social Security payments, build a new urban-to-suburban highway network, or reduce addiction to gambling. Few of us would believe that the nominal public authorities could do a fully satisfactory job, but having all the stakeholders involved would invariably give a better result. Even better would be to recognize that our best *a priori* planning has flaws, so we should

design flexible systems with which we can experiment, learn, and improve.

**10. Do not treat organizations and institutions as entities with intrinsic rights.** Schools, organizations, and corporations are merely bricks and mortar; any rights and freedoms they have, such as the right to privacy, are bestowed by the people. People, then, have a great responsibility to ensure that such institutions receive no greater latitude with the law than is given to the common citizen.

Institutions are the primary means for meeting our needs and reaching our goals. To anthropomorphize them with imputed rights and powers will isolate them from us and our needs and make them the instruments for satisfying the private goals of their owners or managers. Enron, World-Com, and Andersen are only a taste of what harm mythic rights and privileges will bring about if we fail to reestablish people's sovereignty over all organizations.