Introduction

We are born into life. It is not our decision. We may even say that we are thrown into the sea of life without being able to swim. At first life is fragile. For a few years we remain dependent on our parents, especially on our mothers. Gradually we develop self-awareness. We enjoy being touched and being held tight. We begin to smile because people smile at us. We begin to talk because people talk to us. We take our first steps. Slowly but surely, we become members of the immediate family, the nation, and the human family.

As we become increasingly independent of our parents, we develop the freedom, the courage and, with these, the responsibility to act. There is much in life over which we have no control. We do not choose our parents and we have no say about the family, the country and the culture into which we are born. We are born with genetic dispositions. My wife, for instance, belongs to the 12% of people with a Celtic background who carry too much iron in their blood. Some are born as millionaires, others into abject poverty. The relationships that we experience in early days with our immediate family, especially our mothers and fathers, will determine to a significant extent whether in life we have a basic trust, whether we accept authority, and whether our attitude to life is compassionate or punitive. The class or caste of our parents determines our social status. The nature and quality of our education are significant for the professional choices that we can make. Much in life is given. We are invited to accept it and make the best of it.

But, with all that givenness we are not fated. Not everything is determined. There is no invisible force that determines everything we think and do. Although Western economists and politicians talk in personal terms about the "market" which they seem to trust for arranging everything, and Calvinist Christians expect God to plan and enact every detail in life, in fact we human beings are responsible for planning and living our own life. Within the limits of what has been given and what we cannot change, we have freedom of will, freedom of choice, and freedom to act. The

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challenge is to use our freedom towards a successful, meaningful, and fulfilled life. That is our interest in this book, the celebration of life. We turn to an ancient and ever modern text, a "classic," a text that has stood the test of time, with the question whether and in what way it can help us to make the best of life.

I have called this book *Toward a Culture of Freedom*. I have done so with the hope that the Ten Commandments may help us to see a culture of freedom as the best context for a meaningful and successful life. Freedom, like thinking and acting, is part of being human. It is an illusion, however, to think that freedom is doing what we feel like doing at any particular moment. It is not freedom, for instance, when intentional athletes follow their momentary desire to eat fatty sausages or take drugs. Their freedom includes discipline, patience, hard work, and good coaching towards becoming who they want to be. Martha Graham (1894–1991), the great dancer and pioneer of modern dance, once said, "Freedom to a dancer means discipline. That is what technique is for: liberation." It is not freedom when married persons follow their sexual desires to have intimate relationships with any and every person to whom they feel attracted. Their freedom includes the voluntary commitment to be faithful "for better and for worse until death do us part." Freedom needs to be lived within certain limits and conventions within a social and cultural context. Practicing freedom is the delicate challenge to find a way beyond anarchy, legalism, and control.

"Culture" describes the content, the values, the art, and the discipline of living together.[1] It provides the basic parameters for planning and living our lives. If we play football or dance flamenco, there are basic rules that must we must follow. They are given. Nevertheless, within these rules each player or dancer can freely develop and display her or his own creativity, expertise, and competence. The rules are not restrictive. They do not spoil the game or the dance—quite the opposite. They provide the context for identity, joy, and excellence. Culture includes the vision and values that provide the context for a meaningful and successful life.

Vision and values, if they are to be authentic and lasting, must include the resources that can answer basic questions in life: Why is there something and not nothing? What do I live for? How best can I live in light

1. The English word "culture" comes from the Latin "*colere*" which originally referred to the proper use of one's agricultural land, including the removal of weeds. In an agricultural society, it therefore described the basic parameters that guarantee a meaningful and successful life in community.

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of the certainty that one day I will have to die? What is right and what is wrong? What must I do if I want to live a meaningful and successful life? What is the place of the "other" in shaping my own identity? How can I find and occupy my place in the global family? Can we tolerate variety, can we let a thousand flowers bloom, enjoy their beauty, and still maintain our own identity?

We need to discover and name resources that can contribute toward a culture of freedom. Such a culture emphasizes that life in community carries promise and can be exciting. It can release vitality and passion. It can encourage creativity and compassion. In the long run, the cultures that will survive are those that have the spiritual and intellectual resources to live in hope rather than fear, that are committed to peace rather than war, that provide for the basic needs of their people, that will face terrorism with the resilience of people who feel good about themselves and therefore do not need to suppress others.

Such a culture of freedom is a constant challenge and is constantly threatened. Today such threats come from many different directions.

- People demand truth without ideology, and at the same time, they claim that everything is relative.
- There is an ongoing claim, indeed an ongoing experiment in many "Western" cultures to understand and live life without reference to God.
- The world has woken up to the climate crisis and its threat on the environment and on millions of people. However, contrary to political and economic rhetoric, national interest and economic profits are too often still more important than people and the environment.
- Governments and politicians operate with a politics of fear. New laws, committees of bureaucrats and statistics regulate and control our life.
- Traditional institutions such as marriage, family, universities (where intellectual enquiry rather than economic utility is the main purpose), sex (as the language of intimacy, commitment and love), and religious communities are considered old-fashioned—but no real alternatives have been put in their place.

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- Individualism without restraints or commitments is encouraged by misguided self-interest and unbridled consumerism. The shopping center and the airport have become the cathedrals of modern life.
- Rationalism that leaves no room for mystery (where even love, faith, and hope are explained as the effect of hormones) and fundamentalisms that do not value the achievements of humanism and the Enlightenment sideline the resources of a creative and life-giving faith.
- Where religious needs are felt or impulses for the beyond are awakened, people often flee into a spirituality that is individualistic and comforting rather than compassionate and demanding.
- The challenge of death is suppressed or seen as an accident that should not really be there.

We must recognize these threats and remain aware of them. At the same time, we cannot afford the luxury of despair or the laziness of thoughtlessness and inactivity. A culture of freedom builds trust, hope, and responsibility and thereby strengthens the resilience of people to face the challenges that lie ahead confidently and energetically. Our meditation on the Ten Commandments aims to tease us towards a culture of freedom where liberation from coercion and oppression can pave the way for a meaningful and fulfilled life.

Such a culture of freedom entails a universal promise. The first article of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* says, "*All* human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."[2] Many people question today whether there can be a universal vision of morality.

It is true, of course, that many things in life are relative. They depend on our national, cultural, and religious customs and convictions. A woman wearing a scarf (the *hijab*), tied in a certain way over her head, is demanded in Tehran, is controversial in Sydney, and is offensive in Paris. People looking each other in the eye while conversing can be a sign of openness and honesty in Berlin, and a sign of arrogance and offence in Kamasi. Building hostels for senior citizens and hospices for terminally ill people may be

2. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* can be found in United Nations, Office of Public Information, *The International Bill of Human Rights*.

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considered caring in one culture and rude or disrespectful and marginalizing in another.

While many things are relative and situational, the question is, nevertheless, whether that applies to *all* things. Is everything relative? Are all decisions situational? Is female circumcision a cultural practice that is to be respected in certain areas in the world, or is it female genital mutilation—"a way of maintaining a woman's purity by ensuring that she cannot enjoy sex while also increasing men's sexual pleasure"—that needs to be universally banned?[3] Can torture, can the rape of women as an instrument of warfare, can sexual child abuse ever be tolerated or justified? Modern human rights are universal and as such they are reminders that cultural and religious differences do not relativize or even abrogate the ethical demand—quite the contrary. Our awareness of differences raises the question as to what is right and what is wrong in different respective situations. Human existence as such includes the ethical challenge.

At the same time—and especially during this time of the Iraq war—we must realize that freedom and its values cannot be compelled. It must grow from within and it will take on different shapes in different cultures.

The affirmation that human beings "*are born* free and equal in dignity and rights" indicates that human dignity is not conferred and cannot be earned. It is given. It is not the result of empirical observations. Indeed, a look into our world reveals that many people are neither free nor equal. This assertion therefore raises the question as to where human dignity, equality, and freedom are grounded. Who says that we are "free and equal"? For people of faith, freedom and equality are the free and unconditional gift of the creator. No person, no state, and no religion can confer this dignity, nor can they take it away. Freedom needs to be recognized, guarded, and given room to flourish. As individuals and as a society, we are challenged to accept responsibility for safeguarding and filling human dignity with meaning and purpose. It is a challenge to our freedom and responsibility to determine and shape our human dignity. A cherished part of our western tradition says that human life is an end in itself and must not be used to serve other ends.[4] A culture of freedom provides the context in which human dignity can flourish.

3. Neustatter, "It Cuts So Deep," 2.

4. The reference is to Kant's categorical imperative: "Man and every rational being anywhere *exists as end in itself*, not merely as means for the arbitrary use by this or that will; but in all his actions . . . he must at all times be looked upon *as an end*. . . . The

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As we begin our meditation on the Ten Commandments, a few introductory comments may be helpful. The first appendix contains a more comprehensive introduction to the Decalogue.

In the Bible the Ten Commandments are found in two versions, which are quite similar: Exodus 20:2–17 and Deuteronomy 5:6–21.[5] They are set in different contexts. It is only in the introduction and in the reasons given for keeping the Sabbath (the fourth word) that the substantive differences are significant. These two versions have become world famous and therefore form the basis for our reflections.

The Ten Commandments are actually never named as "laws" or "commandments." They are referred to as the ten "words" (Hebrew: *devarim*; Deut 4:13; 10:4; Exod 34:28). That is significant for our understanding of the Ten Commandments. It is the reason why they are also called the *decalogue*, from the Greek *deka* "ten" and *logoi* "words." More important to fuel the story of freedom is the indication that the "commandments" are "words." The God who "speaks" these "words" is the God who liberated Israel from bondage and slavery and at Sinai proclaimed the structures for the journey of freedom. The intention of these "words" therefore is not to replace or negate freedom, but to shape freedom in such a way that it leads to a meaningful and successful life. Freedom is grounded in love. "God is love" (1 John 4:8) summarizes the central affirmation of the Jewish and Christian faiths. As a river flows toward the sea and as a flower turns toward the sun, so our innermost human yearnings are for love. Laws cannot create love. Therefore laws cannot meet our deepest human needs. The prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel realized this when they spoke of a new relationship with God—a relationship not grounded in law but in love. God "will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more," (Jer 31:34).[6] The prophets hear God saying: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts" (Jer 31:31–34; Ezek 36:25–28). Indeed, in Deuteronomy, where we find one of the versions of the "ten words," we are told that the

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practical imperative will then read as follows: Act so that in your own person as well as in the person of every other you are treating mankind also *as an end, never merely as a means*" (*The Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Ethics*, 46–47 [emphases mine]).

5. There are related texts like the curse ritual in Deut 27:15–26, the list of commandments in Exod 34, the prohibitions in Lev 18–20, as well as the exhortations in Ezek 18:5–18 and Ps 15.

6. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

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"words" are not far away—in heaven or beyond the sea—"No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe." (Deut 30:11–14) What and who one loves to talk about and what feeds the needs of one's heart is what is ultimately important—not law but love; not legalism but freedom. Jesus' affirmation of such a vision of freedom and love is among the reasons for his conflict with the religious establishment of his day. For we Christians it has therefore become central to confess that faith in Christ initiates us on a journey of freedom grounded in the love of God. Laws and regulations form the parameters for the journey of freedom. They guide us toward the central passion of life, to love God and to love our neighbor (Gal 5:1; John 8:38; Mark 12:28–31).

Nevertheless, freedom has become a word into which people read their own dreams and which people use to validate their own interests. Wars are started and fought in the name of freedom. People are tortured to further freedom's cause. Revolutions are started under the banner of freedom and soon they devour their own children. It is obvious therefore that the content of freedom needs to be spelled out and that resources are named to travel the journey and to make sure that we travel in the right direction.

We shall see that the "ten words" name their own source. It is God who calls people to the journey of freedom, and God's spirit provides wells from which to drink. At the same time, freedom needs to be measured as to whether it is true to its source, and it needs to be guided to remain on track. The measure is God's word. For Christians that word has found its fullest expression in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the ground and the content of faith. He mediates God who speaks freedom into our conscience—faith comes from hearing the story of Jesus (Rom 10:17)—and he provides the guidance and the resources for the journey.

Jews and Christians alike read and respect the Hebrew Bible in general and the "ten words" in particular. Jesus of Nazareth also accepted the authority of the "ten words." Indeed when Jesus, and following him the early churches, brought together Deut 6:4–5—"The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might"—with Leviticus 19:18—"you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD"—he was summarizing the "ten words" (Mark 12:28–31; Luke 10:27; Matt 22:37–39). The difference between Jews and Christians reading the same text is that Christians interrelate all texts from both testaments with their understanding of the story of Jesus. We need to keep that in mind as we try to relate the "words" to our

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situation. There will be similarities and there will be differences because the final authority for the Christian is the understanding of God as it has been revealed in the story of Jesus.

We must keep in mind that the "ten words" were spoken to a nation, "all Israel" (Deut 5:1). Every culture needs a story that sustains and feeds it, a story that can be told from generation to generation, a story that transcends the business and problems of the day. Moreover, if such a story is to build a resilient culture, a culture of freedom, then it must be liberating and compassionate. For Christians the danger has often been that our faith has led to a private and personal morality. That is important, but not enough. It does not sufficiently recognize that God is the "creator of heaven and earth." Faith in the God of Moses and Jesus must be lived in the public place. It must address not only the challenges of personal morality but also of social ethics. We must therefore ask what the "ten words" mean for responsible living in the public arena.

Just as we need white lines and guard rails to keep us on the road, just as we use maps to track our journeys to their intended destinations, just as we have traffic rules and traffic signs to save us from injury, so these "words" serve as guidelines on the journey of freedom. They invite us toward a culture of freedom. Those who hear and obey the "ten words" help to create such a culture.

The "ten words" have an inherent dignity and authority that is inspiring and persuasive. Theologians, philosophers, moralists, and lawyers of past and present have viewed the "ten words" as a summary of the Judeo-Christian message and guidance to a better future.[7] Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Wycliffe, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jonathan Edwards, Immanuel Kant, Thomas Jefferson, Paul Lehmann and many others have emphasized the importance of the decalogue for shaping human life. When the reformer Martin Luther, to cite only one important shaper of Christian faith, went out to visit the churches in the towns and villages, he abhorred the lack of Christian knowledge, even among the clergy. In response, he wrote his *Small Catechism* (1529), which he then expanded through sermons into the *Large Catechism* (1529). Both begin with the Ten Commandments and an interpretation of them. Luther said about the importance and significance Decalogue for the journey of faith,

7. See Kuntz, *The Ten Commandments in History*; Langston, *Exodus through the Centuries*, 186–230; and Childs, *Exodus*, 431–37.

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> This much is certain: those who know the Ten Commandments perfectly know the entire Scriptures and in all affairs and circumstances are able to counsel, help, comfort, judge, and make decisions in both spiritual and temporal matters. They are qualified to be a judge over all doctrines, walks of life, spirits, legal matters and everything else in the world.[8]

I begin each chapter by citing the respective texts from Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 and adding some brief theological comments. Then, in a more meditative fashion, I reflect on the message of each of the "ten words."

I must finally say a word about the designations "God" and "LORD" in our texts. The Hebrew word for "God" is *Elohim*, while the name for Israel's God is *YHWH*, which is normally pronounced today as *Yahweh* (with different vowels it has also been pronounced *Jehovah*). Since Jews are forbidden to pronounce God's name, they say *Adonai* (Hebrew for "my Lord") where the Hebrew text reads *YHWH*. The Greek translation for *Adonai* is *Kyrios*; the Latin *dominus*; and the English "Lord." However, when we render "LORD" (all capital letters), we try to capture the fact that it is the *name* for Israel's God. Consequently "*I am the LORD your God*" is the English translation for what in Hebrew reads: "*I am YHWH (Yahweh) your Elohim.*"

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8. *The Large Catechism*, preface to the 1530 edition, 382. See also the modern theologian, Paul Lehmann, who writes "The thesis of this book is that the Decalogue is at once the sum of the gospel and the pathfinder toward motivations, structures, and concreteness of responsible behavior in a world being shattered and shaped, in Norbert Wiener's phrase, for 'the human use of human beings'" (*The Decalogue and a Human Future*, 19).

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