

# Do Steal

You want to know why religion in Europe is up the spout? It is called moral relativism. In other words, no standards. A nice English priest, Father Tim Jones of York, has shot to fame or shame by suggesting that the poor should go and shoplift over this holiday season.

Such a genuine and sincere chappie he seems. I'm sure he is a great pastoral comfort to his flock. All Christian charity and goodwill and here he is telling people to break the Ten Commandments. He does qualify it. Only go for the big stores, he says, not the small Mom and Pop ones. Steal, he says, but only from the big guys. As if shoplifters are going to stand outside, calculators in hand, read the balance sheets and then make informed economic judgments. As if shoplifters are going to work out the differences between the threshold of need and desire and decide that stealing basic foodstuffs is fine but electronic gadgets are not.

Of course he is right that our material societies are morally corrupt in many ways. Most people are self-centered, selfish consumers who may occasionally drop a penny or two into the poor box or the collection plate. The fact is most human beings walk by poverty and ignore it. That is human nature, if you will. But now how do we deal with it? Do we suspend all moral laws? It is OK to steal under certain circumstances? No, it is never OK to steal (except to save a person's life). And even stealing from thieves is not acceptable either. Would he say it is fine to beat your wife if you are really feeling very, very depressed and hungry and it makes you feel better? Of course not.

So what is the issue here?

According to the Talmud, a judge always has to follow the law. If someone is guilty of a crime, however small, he is guilty. Motive may differentiate between crimes (e.g., manslaughter as opposed to murder). It may be taken into consideration when deciding on a penalty. But a crime is a crime is a crime. For human society to function effectively, the rule of law is absolute. "On three things the world depends [in order to function effectively]", said Rabban Shimon Ben Gamliel in Mishnah Avot, "Truth, Justice and Peace." And what differentiated Jewish law from Hammurabi and other early legal systems was that in civil matters every citizen has to be equal in the eyes of the law.

This classical Talmudic value lies in the narrative of a judge faced with a thief who had stolen to feed his starving family and must, as a judge, find him guilty. In exactly the same way that he may not give preference to a rich man because of his status, so he may not to a poor one. But then as a human being he has a religious and moral obligation to help feed the thief's family! It is this second part of the equation that is missing in many sectors of modern life, and one of the reasons is the European model of the Welfare State. So much money is taken from ordinary citizens by the state that supposedly has taken on the responsibility of feeding the poor and caring for the deprived that the ordinary citizen wonders why the heck he

should give up from what is leftover to do what he paid the state to do (amongst other things of course). The result is that the average citizen in socialist countries gives pennies each year to charity.

So our poor priest ought to be preaching charity and good works. He ought to open his church and offer shelter and ask his congregants to give food or money to feed the starving, as indeed many churches do. But apparently he knows that all he will get in North England (as opposed to the USA) is bubkas. Average citizens are fed up with hundreds of thousands of scroungers from all over the place, home and abroad, citizens and aliens, of various religious persuasions that all proclaim the benefits of charity but are far better at taking than giving. So he or she closes up instead of opening up. Churches, mosques, and synagogues do indeed usually try their best, but most citizens don't go there.

Why are we Jews so much better on average at giving? Because we know we have to take care of our own. And we despise dependency (or at least we used to until welfare made it easy and legal). As Hillel said (Talmud Shabbat 118a), "Make your Shabbat no better than an ordinary week day rather than depend on others for handouts." Every morning we say in our prayers, "These are the things that have no limit...being kind to other human beings", "These are the things that give you reward in this world and in the next, materially and spiritually: respecting your parents, kindness to others," etc. And every time we say Grace after Meals, we say, "Help us not be dependent on the gifts of other human beings," and we repeat all this, day by day throughout our lives and somewhere down the line it sinks in.

Our whole religious culture is suffused with charity and giving, financially or otherwise. So it is with many other religions too. But theory is never enough unless it is rooted in daily required practice. And nowhere do our spiritual leaders ever tell us, "Be good, but if you can't then it's ok to steal."